

Ash Wednesday

"Mary has a dream one night, while her infant Jesus is asleep on the floor.

In her dream, he is a grown man, and she asks him, trembling and unsure, 'what is the price of salvation?'

He replies, 'the price of salvation is death'.....and Mary cries....." (This is Why I Came,)

How different this is from what passes for Christianity today.

We have traded in the world defying challenge to build and create the beloved community for an obsession with saving one's own individual okole, with an obsession over cultural norms on gender and marriage, with a scrupulous eye on the other fellow's peccadillos..

But truth be told, "the Christian Faith is not a set of personal values or spiritual preferences, it is a claim about actual Reality.

It is about all things having been created by God and ordered to God's good purposes.

Christianity is the claim that God's purposes for the world are established and revealed in Jesus Christ." Murray Rae, paraphrased.

So to those who say that Jesus means everything to me, but, we have to do whatever it takes to keep ourselves safe, meaning guns and bombs and killing, social classes and competition, Jesus replies that the price of salvation is not the death of somebody else, but our own death.

What a strange savior.....

What strange followers he has....

You, my friends, are strange.....

In a little while, you will come forward and ask to have ashes rubbed on your head, ashes that are the burned remnants of our long dead Palm Sunday branches,.

And not only will these ashes be rubbed on your head, they will be rubbed on in the sign of the cross; that horrific image of Roman torture and cruelty; that exquisite instrument of human efforts to control each other with fear and despair.

How very strange indeed...

And yet, the only way to find true life is to endure death.

Not just the death that comes when we close our eyes for the last time, but the death that comes in the face of disease or disappointment or loss.

The death that comes when we confront our own ego, when we acknowledge the stranglehold of justifying pride.

The death that comes when we surrender our indifference to the needs of others, when we forego looking out for number one, when we remember yet again that it is Jesus who welcomes the foreigner, the criminal, the oddball.

Sitting down with death is the point of Ash Wednesday.

We live in a culture that pretends death doesn't exist - while at the same time, paradoxically, we are obsessed with it, in our video games and Pentagon budget, with our medical system that so often refuses to let people die with dignity.

As Christians, we come together to say “no” to all of that, and we wear these ashes on our foreheads as the mark of being dead.

Dead to the common sense of the world.

Dead to clamoring demands for security and safety.

Dead to all the fears and anxieties and false hopes that nationalism and consumerism exploit for the benefit of the few.

Once we die to these things, our eyes are opened to the truth that death doesn't have the last word — that Jesus invites us into his death because through his death is the life that is beyond death: this new life found in the resurrection.

A friend once lamented that the cross is such an awful symbol for our faith, why can't we use the fish instead?

Maybe the cross remains as the central symbol of our faith because it is on that very instrument of human power and control and certainty that God upends all we think of as true.

The cross is a daily reminder that our salvation is not found in jingoistic nationalism or fear and trembling at every threat to our perceived group or individual well being.

Nor is our salvation found in pious sentiment or nice sounding ethics.

Our salvation comes when we heed the call to die; to lose; to release; to be last; to be seen as fools.

It is in the paradox of giving up that we find ourselves finally home; in becoming last that suddenly finds us in first place; in dying, only to awaken into the most marvelous life!

As the poet once said: “Jump, and the net will appear!”

This is why Paul can announce with complete astonishment that:

"We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see-- we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

What are you holding on to today?

What dying do you need to do, do I?

When Jesus grows up, Mary asks him again, "what is the price of salvation?"

"The price of salvation is death," he replies.

And Mary nods, "yes, it is."

Yes, the price of salvation is death....and through death we come face to face with the twinkling eyes and inviting smile of the living God.

This holy lent, may we each of us find the desire to let go; to die in whatever way and to whatever thing is holding us back, so that come this Easter, we too may stand just outside the now empty tomb and laugh at the sheer ... serendipity of it all.

+amen