

Ash Wednesday ~ 2/21

"But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:17-18)

As a child I always hoped that Father would put a big glob of ashes on my forehead on Ash Wednesday. I didn't want to get cheated, and I would look around to see if the other kids got more than I did. Perhaps not the most noble of sentiments on the first day of Lent but somehow I had decided that the more ashes on my head the better Lent I would have.

As a young adult I began to hope that Father wouldn't smear too many ashes on my forehead because I didn't want people gawking at me and because I didn't want to have the ash fall on my white blouse.

Hopefully I have grown to see that the mark of ashes on my forehead is a symbolic gesture that says to the world that during Lent something special is going to be happening inside me.

Ashes are the remains of something that has been totally consumed by fire. They are what stay behind after a blaze has been set and after everything that could add to the heat and the glow is used up. Fire cannot be coaxed from these fine powdery ashes any more that fire can be found springing up from water. These blessed ashes are all that remain from the palms we received last year on Palm Sunday. They remind us that at times we have celebrated the triumph of Jesus but that too often we have been consumed by the world around us, the fears around us, the sin around us, so that all that is left in our souls are the ashes of dreams and promises that were left unfulfilled.

But there is hope in ashes. Just ask a gardener who knows that ashes worked into the earth can help produce some very nice vegetables. Ashes have a secret life that goes on underground as they are transformed into beneficial nutrients.

We are publicly making a statement about our intentions to fast and do penance when we receive ashes on our foreheads. Yet our reading today suggests that regardless of this public statement our Lenten experience must move us into the hidden life of ashes, the one that takes place in the secret of our hearts.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. What ashes in my life needed to be worked into the soil of my soul?
What do I want God to grow inside me this Lent?*
- 2. What inadequacies inside me cause me to want others to notice me, to build up my self-worth?*