

A reflection for Ash Wednesday

Admitting Our Inadequacy

Although we rarely pay attention to it, a great paradox haunts our practices of Lent. We go through these six weeks every year fairly easily; yet if we stopped to reflect seriously on what's going on, it would be a shock. To our liberated American souls, it might even seem like an earthquake.

Just look at the imagery and themes of the period. Lent starts with ashes and a warning: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." We are called to repentance: There is something wrong with us and the world. I am not O.K.; neither are you. We are insufficient. This life is not enough. Each of the six weeks brings a profound admission of our inadequacy.

This is not easy stuff for a world given to excuses and plea-bargaining. The most we admit to is making a mistake or perhaps behavioral problems. But to admit that we are in profound trouble? Why? We all know there is nothing so terribly wrong with us.

Even some of our hymnals have rewritten an old song here and there to mollify our tender egos. I've caught myself doing the same, balking before admissions of "Amazing Grace." I've thought of rephrasing it: something like "... how sweet the sound that saved a nice [person] like me." Come to think of it, singing that I once was "lost" and "blind" seems to be overdoing it a bit.

Lent ends with an equally unpalatable celebration of cataclysmic failure: betrayal, brutality, cowardice, and degradation. True, it is reversed in a triumph of joy and glory, but in a way that defies all the laws of common sense. The dead, crucified one rises, his wounds glorious.

What is Lent trying to rub in our faces with all the talk of mercy, forgiveness, reform, and repentance?

We here in the real world know that we are all really rather nice [people]. Sure, we make mistakes now and then. But who's to blame us for our fumbling? And surely no one of us would ever deserve such a thing as hell. (Polls say that Americans believe in hell, but the vast majority can't imagine themselves being there.) Surely we are not in such desperate need as the drama of Lent seems to suggest. Surely we do not need someone to die for our sins. Some of us do not even know what such a strange concept might mean. Or do we?