

Ash Wednesday
1/03/2006

Mark the Evangelist

Joel 2:1 - 2, 12 - 17

Psalm 51

2 Corinthians 5:20b - 6:10

Matthew 6:1 - 6, 16 - 21

Honest to God, honest to ourselves

Brokeback Mountain is a film about two young men, Ennis and Jack who, in the summer of 1963, begin a relationship with each other while working as sheepherders on the mountains of Wyoming. At that time and in that place such a relationship could not even be hinted at, much less openly lived out. At summer's end the two go their separate ways to marry and raise families. Three years later they meet and discover they still have strong feelings for one another. There is nowhere for them to go with their relationship. For the next 20 years they meet several times a year to for "fishing trips" on Brokeback Mountain. Deceit marks their life and they, and their families, pay the price of not being able to be honest with themselves and others. There is no bigger context in which they can work out their lives. Their lives are a catalogue of losses and you are left wondering where the redemption is to be found. Such religion as is present is a hell-fire and damnation variety that is kept at a distance. The relationship is like a trap from which there is no escape and within which there is no possibility of fulfilment. In the course of the film Ennis' marriage breaks up and Jack dies a violent death. When Ennis learns of this he travels to meet Jack's parents who live on a poverty-stricken farm. Jack's father is in denial about the death, but Jack's mother has understood her son, and the relationship that existed between him and Ennis. In her grief she has an inner peace none of the others share. She invites Ennis to go up to Jack's room where he discovers the clothes his friend died in, and begins the process of grieving. Such redemption as is possible in this film came through the one who had the capacity to see things as they are and move beyond denial to live truthfully in a spirit of grace and love. She was at peace with herself, and reconciled to her neighbour.

If there is a connection between the powerful imagery of Ash Wednesday and the message of *Brokeback Mountain* it is related to the call to live truthfully, and the difficulty of being honest towards God and honest about ourselves. Achieving such honesty means facing up to who God is, and who we are in relation to God. Ashes are used on this day as a powerful sign that we are not transcendent. We are limited and earthly by nature. This would spell doom for us except that this symbol is employed in a larger, redemptive context that speaks of life that is given to us by the one who is not made of dust and ashes. One who offers life where no expectation of life exists.

The prophet Joel speaks of a crisis on the doorstep when the people seem to have forgotten God. He twice calls for the trumpet to sound a note of alarm. The first note is to awaken the citizens to the crisis of God's presence, depicted as an invading army. The second is a signal to engage in re-presenting themselves to God. Joel uses the words "return" and "render" to indicate the community is being roused from inattentiveness to gather and re-engage with God; to remember who God is, what God

promises, and what this means for them. Even in these dire circumstances the heart of God is compassionate and merciful.

Ash Wednesday is a day when we choose to take a fresh look at our true situation in the world before God. The truth the Bible seeks to have us live by is this: when we live for God we live by the power of life. When we turn away from God the power death invades our life. Ash reminds us of mortality. By this sign, we are roused from the inattentiveness of living in our own way, and called to turn and re-present ourselves to the one who gives life.

This is the beginning of Lent. The idea of Lenten disciplines is not about how much chocolate we eat. It is about noticing what we treasure because that is where we will find the true focus of our heart. True Lenten discipline is to rend the heart - to examine how congruent our theological, political, economic and personal lives are with the character of God. This is one more chance to turn around.

Joel's prophecy came at a black time. It was a black day for Ennis when he discovered Jack had died, and it was a black day for Jack's mother when she discovered the truth about her son's sexuality. The Lenten journey we begin here ends on another dark day - on a hill with a cross and a cry of dereliction. But all is not lost. We now know that the cross marks the place where heart of God has given to us, to the utmost. So much are we treasured by God. This is the bigger context in which we live and move, and from which we may gain a renewed view of the reality of God, and in the strength of this vision may travel safely, and live.