

Ash Wednesday (JLC) 22 February 2023

You might call me a literalist – but I have some problems with two aspects of the Ash Wednesday tradition of the Catholic and I suppose also of the Anglican Church. In a few moments, while applying ashes we will probably say, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return”. This is a reminder of what Qohelet says: “All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again” (Eccl 3:20 NRSV) (cf. Ps 104:29 NRSV: “When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust”).

So we speak about *dust*, but we use *ashes*. Now, I do not think that dust and ashes are the same. According to Merriam-Webster “dust” is “fine particles of matter” and “the particles into which something disintegrates”¹ (in the Bible it frequently refers to “loose earth or ground”). “Ash” is in the M-W: “the solid residue left when combustible material is thoroughly burned or is oxidized by chemical means”². So we might be able to say that in English ashes are dust, but not all dust is ashes, since ashes are the result of combustion, of burning and as such mostly the result of destruction by fire. We read in Gen 2:7, “then the LORD God formed *ha’adam* from the dust of *ha’adamah*”. We are made from the dust of the ground, the loose earth, there is no indication that this includes ashes. So should we not rather use “dust” today and call this day “Dust Wednesday”? However, there is much evidence that in the Bible “dust” and “ashes” are frequently closely associated. In a typical parallelismus membrorum we read in Ps 113:7: “He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap” (NRSV). “Dust and ashes” are frequently used in a *hendiadion*, a double expression which has but one meaning. In Gen 18:27 when Abraham is in the process of haggling with God speaking up against the plan to punish the righteous with the wicked, he approaches God acknowledging his humility: “Abraham answered, ‘Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.’” Job reflects his gruesome situation in the words: “He has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes” (Job 30:19 NRSV). In the Book of Sirach we read: “How can dust and ashes be proud? Even in life the human body decays” (Sir 10:9 NRSV, cf. 17:32; 40:3). The awareness of being “dust and ashes” is used in the Bible to refer to a healthy realism of the humans about their situation, a sound humility which despite contingency, fragility and weakness does not lead human persons to forget their dignity.

When we read the Bible from the perspective of dust and ashes, we also note that when people confronted with evil, destruction, calamity, whenever they are horrified, when they are mourning or when they feel guilty, they put dust or ashes on their head. After thirty-six of his men had been killed, “Joshua tore his clothes, and fell to the ground on his face before the ark of the LORD until the evening, he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust on their heads” (Jos 7:5 NRSV). After describing in detail the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC, the Book of Lamentations adds, “The elders of daughter Zion sit on the ground in silence; they have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth; the young girls of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground” (Lam. 2:10 NRSV). In the context of the lamentations over the fall of the city of Babylon, the Book of Revelation similarly reminds us: “And they threw dust on their heads, as they wept and mourned, crying out, ‘Alas, alas, the great city, where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! For in one hour she has been laid waste’” (Rev 18:19 NRSV). After

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dust>

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ash>

having been raped and sent away by Amnon, Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went” (2 Sam 13:19 NRSV). As we can see in different parts of the Bible at different times, people put dust or ashes on their heads in times of great calamity and horrifying events. These are people who are affected, who allow themselves to be affected by the calamities of this world. Putting dust or ashes on their heads goes along with weeping, tearing of garments, falling or bowing to the ground, mourning. Putting dust/ashes on their head is a sign that they care for the victims (including themselves when they are victimised). So whether we use dust or ashes, whether we call this day Ash Wednesday or Dust Wednesday, does not matter. What really matters is whether we allow ourselves to leave our hiding places, to give up or feigned position of neutrality and to start getting involved and caring about the victims of the horrors that are going all around us. But this is probably why it is not enough to say: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return”, but we need to add the second phrase which the liturgy offers us to choose from: “Repent and believe in the gospel”. For believing in the gospel, truly believing means that we cannot be neutral when innocent people suffer.

So it looks like my first problem is solved, but I told you about two problems I have with the Ash Wednesday tradition. We just read in the gospel of Matthew: “But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting” (Mt 6:17)). But in a few moments we shall do the exact opposite of what Jesus tells us. We did not bring oil to anoint our heads, but ashes to make sure everyone sees we are fasting. “I do not want ashes to be strewn on my head, but I want a cross with ashes on my forehead, so that everyone can see it”, someone told me this morning. “Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them”, Jesus say in Mt 6:1. Then he gives the examples of almsgiving, praying and fasting which all should be “in secret”. So what are we doing here? We might say: Fortunately, we are not Biblical literalists. But even then this tension between what the gospel tells us and what we do in the liturgy may be too important to just neglect it, because even if we agree to do the exact opposite of what Jesus tells us, we still need to find a way to listen to he is trying to tell us and obey him. Whatever we do, whether we put ashes or oil on our head, whether we do it in private or in secret, the question that Jesus wants us to face is whether what we do is authentic or fake, do we really mean it or do we put on airs, is it for real or for the show? Is the ultimate motivation of what we do selfish or truly for others? Jesus seems to know that we are always looking for a reward, people are able to turn everything into a business transaction. Even in the greatest sacrifice, people can still try to get something out of it for themselves, even if it is only “moral superiority”. Jesus is no Lutheran *avant la lettre*, nor a Derridaen utopist. He does not want to do away with all rewards. But he tells us that the reward is something that we cannot provide or make for ourselves. It is rather a gift from God at a time and in a shape that God determines: “... your Father who sees in secret will repay you”. Maybe the most radical Lenten observance would be to give up trying to provide the rewards or kick-backs of our Lenten observances by ourselves and doing all we do out of the goodness of our hearts and leaving everything else to God.

The two admittedly somewhat literalist problems with the Ash Wednesday traditions have nevertheless led me to new insights for myself. First, dust and ashes can be used to refer to the more or less same reality of the fragility and humility but nonetheless dignified human existence. Putting dust or ashes on one’s head is a performative action expressing one’s acknowledgement

that we are affected deeply by a horrible event, the exact opposite of neutrality and indifference. Putting ashes or dust on our heads is a statement that we care and a commitment, I would hope, to help. If we simply put ashes on our heads as a sign of our Lenten observance, telling everyone that we give up chocolate for 40 days or the like, this runs the risk of going in against what Jesus explicitly tells us in the gospel. Whether we put ashes or oil on our head, the challenge remains that we give up seeking our own rewards for whatever we do. It is sad to say: If we allow the horrors that are going on around us in the world to touch us, we will need lots of ashes to put on our heads. If we are to give up our neutrality in the violent conflicts and take the side of the victims, we need to leave the secret chambers of our indifference and ask ourselves: Why am I not out in the streets lending a voice to the voiceless?

During this Lent we might find inspiration for this with Sophie Scholl, a young German student who died 80 years ago today. In the summer of 1942 she became a member of the White Rose, a student resistance group who only did one thing: they wrote one page flyers or leaflets which they copied and distributed secretly. Sophie and her brother Hans were discovered as they were distributing a flyer in the university of Munich on 18 February 1943. Tried in the so-called People's Court Sophie Scholl said to the famous Nazi judge Roland Freisler on 22 February 1943, exactly 80 years ago today: "Somebody, after all, had to make a start. What we wrote and said is also believed by many others. They just don't dare express themselves as we did." She was found guilty of treason and executed the same day at 5 pm. The seemingly powerful Nazi dictatorship of Germany was afraid of one 21 year old student. How much more afraid would the evildoers of the world today be afraid of us ...

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Sophie Scholl (9 May 1921 – 22 February 1943)