

“Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel”(X 3)

That litany we hear, or may hear, repeated over and over again on Ash Wednesday as we are reminded in a very graphic manner of our mortality and approaching death, even more graphically rendered in the alternative expression

“Remember, Adam (or man),you are dust and to dust you will return.”

– indeed Adam and dust or soil are cognate – closely related, belonging to the same word field and all three readings today are toying with the idea of just what it is that man is made for in respect of God, what does God want from us in our short span of life created from dust and yet also made in God’s image. The passage in Ezekiel shows a development in the idea of personal responsibility – it’s no good blaming your ancestors, or your parents and so on, for your own sin – what are you going to do about it? The Gospel presents much the same challenge – it doesn’t matter who you are, or what stage of virtue you may think you have, the time to repent is now – even those who have first said yes but fail to follow through and say ‘no’ by their manner of life, by their resistance to God’s will, can change their mind – so there is hope for us all. But more than that this hope resides not only in a particular image of God as the loving father, but in the particular person of Christ his son sent in Irenaeus’s famous formulation to recapitulate everything we are in order to restore in us that image of God we so readily tarnish. So Christ is key here as the tremendous hymn in the letter to the Philippians makes clear and it is not Christ’s pre- existence as the Son of God which is first at issue here but Christ as “the antitype of disobedient Adam” - becoming as we are, dust to dust, destined for death but unlike Adam, and those who first say yes but fail to follow through, he remains humbler yet, more human even than we are, even to accepting death on a cross. This surrender of self-will is what overcoming sin (or selfishness) is all about but ultimately only made possible in Christ.

“ Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel” could as well be rendered as taking on the mind of Christ, or better, allowing Christ, allowing his Spirit to change your mind for you. We all know that struggle, allowing something new, something different to take place in us, that adolescent rebellion that never quite goes away and the blame game we play instead. No, just step back a moment from the rebellious self and let God in Christ do what one cannot do for oneself . God allows change because change is God’s prerogative, the unchanging God who encourages us too to be unchanging in love. Allow this to happen and it will do wonders for one’s own self image to the point where it doesn’t matter any more – as we imitate Christ in his self- emptying so we find ourselves like him, destined for glory. Hard to believe – try it.

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour