

Remember we are ashes: Cathedral, Lent 1 2018

Napier churches have a bit of a dilemma this weekend. The Cathedral has seen a horde of visitors, either here for a few hours on a cruise ship or dressed to the nines for a full-on Art Deco celebration. But many of you will know that because of Easter being a moveable feast determined (primitively) by the occasion of a full moon, today happens also to be the first Sunday in Lent, the Sunday after Ash Wednesday, when Christians of many traditions receive the mark of the cross in ashes on our foreheads. Here at the Cathedral we observed that solemnity with our Roman Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian sisters and brothers.

So we have a clash of festive flappers and penitent pilgrims, and what can the connection be?

For the past few days we've been preparing for the "Swing and a Prayer" service at 5pm today with the Navy Band, this year returning to stories of the earthquake survivors. We are strongly reminded that this whole festival is the recent child of a terrible tragedy that destroyed much of Hawkes Bay in 1931. How many of our visitors comprehend, though, the fires that followed the earthquake? In Napier, nearly 11 city blocks were consumed by fire. Stories from that cataclysm sombrely remind us that of some people, all that was left in the burnt out buildings was their ashes.

Many Christians receive the sign of ashes on their foreheads with the words "*Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return*", something we are reminded of at most funerals: ashes to ashes, dust to dust...

I think it's fair to say that most of us would prefer to think of ourselves as exceptions to this rule. Perhaps a skin crème to tighten those bingo wings, or a sleek motor that nurtures the illusion of carefree youth despite the encroaching pounds and ounces (I'm talking my generation of education here, when you had sensible things like the 6th form and prefects with canes).

So while I was musing on this mortality business I put the telly on to catch up with that Dawn French thing "*Delicious*", the second series of which opens with the dead two-timing husband describing for the audience the exact time and nature of some hapless individual's death, and wouldn't we

wig out if we actually did know the date and the circumstances of our deaths, (euthanasia excepted, not going there today, but who knows?) Lent is about looking mortality in the face and not looking away quickly.

Young and old surrounded our altar on Wednesday as the four clergy marked each one with the sign of the cross and said *Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return; turn from sin and follow Christ.*

I found it profoundly moving to share this service across our four churches which have covenanted not to do separately what we can do together. Some people I knew, many I didn't, but as I asked each of them I felt a deepened sense of connection. A young girl - *You have your whole life ahead of you, and I am asking you to remember you are dust. That's not easy.* And to some of riper years *You've lost someone you love, and I am asking you to remember you are dust – that's not easy.* And yet everyone is there, together, to prepare to enter the 40 days of wilderness with Jesus.

Of course the number 40 and the wilderness are significant, and form the ground for our participation. The Gospel writers create their narratives with purpose: Moses led the people into the wilderness where they were tested by God for forty years. Jesus is the new liberator, who spends 40 days in the wilderness being tested also. Indeed, he is “*driven by the Spirit*” to do so, that's how important it is.

A vast wilderness, like the Sinai, is a place of disorientation, and a place of silence, a place to hear what your inner voices are saying by way of temptation or taunting. We live in what CS Lewis called “The Kingdom of Noise”, and there we are constantly bombarded by distractions. We are marketed to in a way which sometimes feels spooky – should I be thinking about funeral insurance? Blah blah blah. Here is a simple Lenten discipline: choose some solitude and silence.

There are at least three layers, maybe four, to the wilderness story. There's the history of Israel in the wilderness, making their calf of gold and partying like it was 1400 BC with “*the noise of revellers*”. Then there's Jesus' preparation for his own vocation by dealing with his own inner demons of temptation.

The third layer is of course the journey which we are individually invited

to make to prepare for Easter. It is not easy to choose to be in the wilderness, but it is there that we can allow the questions to arise. Jane Williams puts them this way: *What are you for? What do you depend on? Where do you get your self-definition?* These are, I think, paraphrases of the temptations Jesus faced.

But this year I've realised that there's a fourth layer. The realisation started when I had the privilege of marking the cross of ashes on the people and I realised that Lent is something that the faith community needs to do together, needs to BE together. The life of the Church provides us with a framework in which we can safely engage with the wilderness, the place of uncertainty. When a church closes its doors for the last time, we too feel the cold draught as we see few children and young people, or even working-age adults in the pews. This is a shared experience of disorientation.

Ultimately, though, it was a picture I saw yesterday which pierced my heart – you can find it on a notice board by the entrance – a woman who had clearly attended an Ash Wednesday service that morning embracing another in shared grief and devastation at the sight of the latest terrible school shooting in Florida. And I remembered the school-age girl that I had marked with the ashes: *You have your whole life ahead of you and I am asking you to remember that you are dust. That's not easy.*

The Lenten wilderness is a broad space. The fourth layer of meaning is our calling to realise that they are us. We are them. You cannot look at that picture without being moved. Can we even begin to imagine the Lenten journey these bereaved ones will travel? How will they arrive at Easter Day?

As we grieve with them today so we come together this afternoon to celebrate courage and to commemorate all who were lost in the rubble and ashes. The place of wilderness is broad, but it is also deep within history.

The people of Israel are there. Jesus is there. The people of 1931 are there. You and I are there. And so, in Florida and elsewhere, are our neighbours.

- Ian Render

