

Ash Wednesday 2019

A 1993 film that I hear people refer to when thinking of repeat experiences or what is sometimes termed *déjà vu* is Groundhog Day which you may have seen?



It tells the story of how a person does not really progress or positively transform in life until they have accepted the unvarnished truth about themselves and learnt some basic lessons resulting in changed behaviour.

The main character in the film keeps reliving Groundhog Day as a TV journalist until he really comes to terms with himself and in so doing overcomes himself as he is to become a new and better person.

The day after this happens is a new day. Until then every day is lived as Groundhog Day and he is the TV reporter covering the same, same old, same old story with all the boredom you might expect.

I am old enough to realize that I need to keep visiting certain uncomfortable realities in myself because they still need sorting. I first realized this at age 17 when I practiced confession or the 'Sacrament of Reconciliation' as it was being re-labeled in the Roman Catholic Church. This involved going into a dim dark closet and speaking out one's sins to a priest who sat through a lattice work screen. He listened, commented and then told me to say certain prayers several times before absolving me. My big realization as a teenager was that I confessed the same sins every time! It was a repeating experience of *déjà vu* or something like - Groundhog Day. That was a life changing realization that led me to ask: "So where is God in all this anyway?" Is life really like a stuck record or might I expect God to be a real factor, a significant reality?

Half a century later Ash Wednesday itself is something of a Groundhog Day for me. I know the readings. I know the prayers. I am going home with a cross of ash smudged on my head- again! So no surprises, but it's value to me is confronting me with what I still need to appreciate again and again about the Gospel in relation to myself.

The Gospel consists of four components. It's good news that includes bad news.

- A. God created the heaven and the earth and it was all good.
- B. Human disobedience caused a fall in what had been created so it became bad in as much as it was not the original good.
- C. Then 3rdly, in fullness of time God personally reached out in love through his Son Jesus Christ to rescue and redeem all that was fallen through his own self-giving for the love for the World in Creation. That is God's commitment to his world and to us.
- D. Then looking ahead -through Jesus Christ- the Creation will be completely renewed and transformed at the end of this age for a new age of God's, heaven on earth.

Ash Wednesday rubs these Gospel components on our faces in ash.

- God made a good earth, material existence is God's good making and we are made from that dust or basic stuff that scientist describe as 'exploded stars'.
- We dusty humans were given an assigned role and shared the glory of God but have in many and various ways reduced and defiled that good creation, including ourselves. There is much to mourn and lament in sackcloth and ashes/

Until we accept all this we cannot hope for the benefit of God's saving work – past and future to have power in the present.

Unless we accept the ashes as a reminder of our fallen-ness and sin in the greater sin we are doomed to a future of ashes and nothing more.

If we accept the ashes of our lives, while trusting God's salvation, we will know the fullness of his salvation even through the ashes and dust of death.

This is not for the faint hearted so I commend your courage in taking effort to step here tonight into this difficult confession to mark the start of our Lenten journey to the cross and resurrection.

Being here you seek to understand face the problem and your place in it before hearing the solution of Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

It is not easy:

- We need to really realize that we are not God and may need to stop trying to be!
 - We do not need to be in control.
 - We do not need to know everything.
 - God takes care of being God.
 - We are contingent creatures living in the wake of the One who is whom He will be.
- We need to also acknowledge that we are part of a human family that has repeatedly allowed fear, greed, pride, violence, lust, arrogance and rebellion to shape our personal history. Humanity's corporate history has shaped us. The abused become abusers and the vicious cycles of sin keep turning. We are all victims and villains.
 - All this perspective is in contrast to much consumer driven or client-centered thinking of our age where God if seen at all is seen as existing to help us. Unchecked this easily leads to us then creating God in our own image for our pleasure with untold deception to follow.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of a season where we are invited to soberly consider and readjust to these realities as the Gospel presents them.

A story told by Jesus that reflects this process of remembering what we have lost and coming to sober awareness is the so-called 'Prodigal Son' who after much debauched and inauthentic living finds himself in a pigpen with all the mud and slops. There he comes to his senses and remembers the goodness enjoyed by the servants in his father's house. He remembers and imagines his former life and longs for it.

Ash is a taste of the pigpen serving to remind us both of our own creaturely composition in common with the universe around us but also the depths to which we have sunk in rejecting God and the call to repentance which attends coming to our senses.

Coming to our senses means realizing who and what we are but with confidence in God's mercy and grace. This may involve quiet reflection considering why Jesus our Saviour had to suffer as he did for us, even you and me. Was it really necessary?

A good Lent journey will bring us to see that.

- Yes, I need salvation. Me, myself, I!
- Yes, I am in need of forgiving and healing grace.

That is the necessary journey to the Cross and Resurrection we need to take again and again until we get it.