



Ash Wednesday – March 9, 2011

Joel 2.1-2,12-17

A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker

Blow the trumpet in Zion: call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Let them return to the Lord with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. Between the vestibule and the altar, let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep.

For 46 weeks of the year our assembly is alleluiaic, our worship, praise, and our gospel, joy. What, then, is this exhortation to tears? Tears, surely, are not something to be chosen, but rather to be endured. Who would deliberately choose tears over laughter? Who wants to weep? And yet, that is what we are called to do. How do we know that Lent, this other 6 weeks, isn't just an exercise in religious masochism?

Well, I don't believe it is. And to explain why, I need to say something more about tears, something about what it might mean in this context of Lent to have "a good cry". (Funny expression, that, and yet, I choose it purposefully.)

I personally am not a big "crier". But I ask myself when tears do come. And it seems to me that tears are often the sign that for once, we have seen and are convicted by the contradiction between what we are and what we hope for. Somehow that realisation punctures our defences, pierces our heart if you will, and our little fantasies about ourselves come crashing down around us. And we weep. What about? Perhaps about what could only be called sin: the dawning realisation that in fact we have not been blameless in some relationship where we have until now styled ourselves the victim. But equally, about the failure of our assumptions or dreams for ourselves: the rude realization that we are only average, and will never be vice-president, finance; or the sorry admission that we are not only alone, but lonely, and likely to remain so. Tears are very often the sign that the truth has finally got to us. They betoken self-knowledge, and a terrible but lovely vulnerability. And this, I submit, is a hundred times more healthy than contrived conviviality, than living — much less believing — a lie.

What else may we say? The obvious: tears are wet. When a soul is hardened by sin, or by whatever protections it concocts against making itself tender and vulnerable to the movement of God within it, it is like parched ground — cracked, disfigured, and incapable of supporting any but the hardiest of vegetation. Tears are to such a soul as a steady trickle of water to such a soil. They soften the soul, loosen it as soil is loosened, in order that it may be opened up, aerated, to receive and support the seed of new life. It was St. Ephrem who said, tears falling on a corpse cannot restore it; but if they fall on a soul, they will bring it back to life.

This is not unlike the teaching of the Eastern Church, which speaks of tears as the Mystery of the Second Baptism. Just as we are initially cleansed from our sins by the water bath of baptism, so the tears which well up from within may cleanse us from our subsequent sins. These are the tears of truth, and they flood a hardened soul and a cold heart with renewed life. It is, after all, no accident that the rite for the Reconciliation of a Penitent occurs in our prayer book immediately after Baptism.

Lest you doubt these things, I ask you to consider what happens on those occasions, rare or otherwise, when you yourself succumb to a good cry. For have you ever noticed that such tears are very often the threshold between near despair, and renewed hope? That they stand between regret, remorse, even self-pity, and a

renewed resolve to get on with our life, and make it better? Oh, there might be an intervening headache, and a good snooze to follow, but the landscape seldom looks just so bleak as it did only an hour ago; and that is because we have been carried on the tide of our tears to a new outlook.

Lent is a season for tears (certainly figuratively, even literally), because it is a season for all these things. For facing the unvarnished truth about ourselves; for softening and opening up our parched souls, that they may receive and sustain life; for a cleansing which wells up from within; for passing from despair to hope. It is season for journeying back to the font, back to the waters of our first baptism, where having been cleansed by the baptism of our own tears, we shall renew our covenant with God at the Easter Vigil.

I leave you with an image from Narnia¹, the story of an insufferable little boy named Eustace, and of his own journey from tears to the font. Eustace was so selfish, so mean, so hardened, that he was eventually turned into a dragon:

He had turned into a dragon while he was asleep. Sleeping on a dragon's hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he had become a dragon himself... In spite of the pain, his first feeling was one of relief. There was nothing to be afraid of any more. He was a terror himself now and nothing in the world but a knight (and not all of those) would dare to attack him. He could get even with Caspian and Edmund now — But the moment he thought this he realised that he didn't want to. He wanted to be friends. He wanted to get back among humans and talk and laugh and share things. He realised that he was a monster cut off from the whole human race. An appalling loneliness came over him. He began to see that the others had not really been fiends at all. He began to wonder if he himself had been such a nice person as he had always supposed. When he thought of this the poor dragon that had been Eustace lifted up its voice and wept.

The time comes for some shedding of the dragon skins. Eustace manages to get the first three layers off himself, but it is only by the assistance of the great lion Aslan that he is able to recover his true self. Eustace later describes it:

The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began peeling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt . . . there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly looking than the others had been. And there I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me — I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on — and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone . . .

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¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (Harmondsworth: Puffin, 1965), pp. 81-3,96.