22nd February 2023

Ashes

"In ashes of despaire, though burnt, shall make thee live."
Sir Philip Sidney, *Arcadia*

This is Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent. Following the indulgences of "Shrove Tuesday" or "Pancake Day" yesterday when, traditionally, much feasting and merriment took place before the austerity to follow, Ash Wednesday marks the start of a time of preparation for Christians before the remembrances of Holy Week. It's a period of self-examination, mourning for sinfulness, fasting, and the like, in order that a person might be better able to receive the glories that surround Easter.

The ash is the symbol of the "sackcloth and ashes" of past ages. In some Christian traditions, the believer has an ash mark placed on their forehead as a sign of their penitence. I recall Catholic classmates in my Primary School years ago getting the morning off school to go to chapel for an Ash Wednesday act of worship and coming back with a black smudge on their face – which they were forbidden to rub off. Not much is made of Ash Wednesday in the Presbyterian tradition. Indeed, the significance of Lent has never been much of a priority either – sad to say.

A minister I knew decided to rekindle (pardon the pun!) the Ash Wednesday symbolism. Aware that the Anglo-Catholic practice was to burn palm-fronds (from Holy Week the previous year) to create ashes, he was disappointed to find no redundant palm-branches stored away in his local church. There was, however, the skeletal remains of the church Christmas tree in the back yard, which, he reckoned, would serve the purpose just fine. So, people gathered with much anticipation in the church carpark on Ash Wednesday as the Christmas tree was sent alight. But, being tinder-dry – and *very* large – the tree caught fire with an enormous "Whoosh!", and almost started a major, and destructive, conflagration. Worshippers ran hither and thither to escape the blaze. If they had black smudges on them, it was from ash drifting down from the sky and *not* a cross delicately placed on a forehead by a minister or priest.

We can't get everything right. Even creating ashes can go array. But that's why Ash Wednesday is important, as we face what we get wrong, and are suitably penitent through the weeks of Lent that await us.

A prayer for today

I'm sorry … I really am. Forgive me? You really do. Amen

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