

**St Mark's, Niagara on the Lake**  
**Ash Wednesday, year 'A'**  
**22 February 2023**  
**The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

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Many of you are familiar with Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, which tells the story of Hester Prynne, a young woman in seventeenth-century, Puritan Boston who is made to wear a scarlet letter "A" on her dress as a sign to others that she was an adulteress. The book begins with a scene in which Hester is publicly shamed by being made to stand on the scaffold on Boston Common for three hours, enduring the taunts and jibes of the crowd.

It seems that we just can't get enough of public shaming, and our thirst for it has been made all the easier by an all-pervasive media and an all-invasive social media. Of course a lot of people these days do seem to have lost any sense of shame. They say and do things in public that would have been unthinkable a generation or two ago. They don't have any filters, and they don't have any idea of consequences. So the natural tendency of those of us who *do* rationally and deliberately filter what we say and do, and who *do* think about consequences, is to shame these thoughtless ones for their misdeeds.

Yet here we are tonight at this solemn service, and we might very well ask ourselves if God is rubbing our noses in all the things we've done that have made him ashamed of us? It certainly looks and feels that way. We even have the Church's version of the scarlet 'A' ground onto our foreheads—a symbol to the world of how selfish, proud, and wayward we've been. We ask ourselves, "Is God ashamed of me? Is he so ashamed of me that he is compelled to publicly humiliate me and force to me to say over and over again, 'I'm sorry, I'll do better,' until it sticks?"

Well, there certainly is a type of Christian who thinks that way. The Puritans of Hester Prynne's time clearly did, as did the Pietistic Lutherans of my ancestry. And they're around today in many guises. Perhaps even some of you think this way. But what this Ash Wednesday liturgy tells us is that such thinking is a disgrace to God. Certainly God is grieved when we do wrong, when we fall short—when we sin. He may be disappointed when we choose to be less than who we were made to be. But he is never ashamed of us, nor is he, as the writer of Hebrews reminds us, ashamed to be called our God.

That doesn't mean that *we* shouldn't be ashamed of ourselves, and in a few minutes we'll say a litany which spells out in graphic detail all of the ways in which we have failed God and failed ourselves, too: We have not loved God as he loves us; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves; we have been proud and hypocritical; we have been careless and negligent in the things of the spirit; we have been uncharitable and

contemptuous. The list is long—as well it should be, since our misdeeds are innumerable.

Innumerable, but not unforgivable. The words of the litany are our words. But notice how they differ from God’s words that we hear tonight:

Return to the Lord your God for he is gracious and merciful;  
as a father cares for his children, so does the Lord care for those who fear him;  
in Christ we become the righteousness of God;  
for where our treasure is, there our heart will be also.

These words are the divine counterpoint to our lamentable litany of failings and frustrations. No: they’re more than that. They’re the divine counterweight to them.

To confess our sins to God isn’t to change God’s mind about us. His mind is already made up: he loves us no matter what. As the psalmist says, “He knows whereof we are made; he remembers that we are but dust.” When we come before God, fling ourselves on his mercy and tell him how sorry we are that we have transgressed, messed up and been deliberately selfish, it’s because we need to remember that we’ve already been forgiven. That reminder is powerful and life-giving, and it’s absolutely crucial that we hear it, because if we don’t, we begin to develop destructive complexes about ourselves and about God.

And there’s something else we need to be reminded of tonight, and that’s that we’re mortal and our days on this earth are short. Even though we fancy that we can go on indefinitely, we know that we can’t. So tonight we also come to offer up all of our anxiety about our mortality to God, in the faith that only by Christ’s death and resurrection—only by the cross—does our mortality and finality have any meaning. And having done these things, having been reminded of the dazzling grace of God that always is, we’re set again on the path of the Lenten way.

A cheeky—albeit perspicacious—friend was talking to me yesterday about Ash Wednesday. “Oh, is that the day when you all get your birthmark?” she asked. Indeed it is. Tonight we come to be signed again with that which alone gives life. Tonight we wear the sign in answer to a sceptical and hostile world which asks, “Where is their God?” Tonight we come to throw ourselves on the mercy of God and to remember that we are ransomed, healed, restored, and forgiven. So wear the cross boldly. Do not be ashamed of your birthmark. By it, declare to the world that the Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness.