

Ash Wednesday, 2011

If you've watched any TV at all recently you'll have seen a series of humorous commercials about bunch of mostly lovable and friendly Vikings (who – oddly – have English accents!) in places like the Grand Canyon, Hollywood, Las Vegas, and New Orleans doing Viking-like things that usually seem to incur expense! They don't seem to care about the expense because it can all go on.....a credit card!

That's what they're selling, of course: the credit card – no problem about anything because they just “put it on the card!”. And the tag-line is “what's in your wallet?”

The implication is, of course, that ‘what's in my wallet’ will greatly effect how I journey through life – and if I just had the right credit card, all would be plain sailing! It doesn't matter what goes on around me, or even what I do, that runs up a bill – just put it on the card.

On Ash Wednesday there's a similar question about things we accumulate: “what's in your attic?!” Now I suspect that being concerned with what's in our wallets, much more than the ‘old junk’ that's in our attics, would help to explain why Ash Wednesday isn't exactly the high point for attendance during the Christian year! The commercial implies that ‘what's in our wallets’ can ‘wash away’ all our troubles. The content of our attics suggests that implication simply isn't true.

If I had an attic, I know what it would be full of! Actually I have a basement that's really choc-a-block with stuff – and perhaps, in spatial terms, the metaphor of basement storage gets closer to the heaven/hell divide than the attic one!

What I have stored in my physical basement goes back nearly 50 years!

Some of it is of profound value to me, but, in the end, a good part of it is just junk – junk I've had stored up for years and years. Junk that's taking up useful space; junk that's now musty and covered in dust, and desperately in need o f – well, what?

House cleaning! House cleaning is in order. Some sort of assessment of whether or not I should keep stuff or dispose of it. Does it have any value any more? Those sorts of questions come to mind when I think about all that stuff.

But it's hard – because that sort of cleaning requires more than simply saying “time to find this stuff a new home” – such cleaning carries powerful symbolic and metaphorical freight, because as the things go away so do parts of my life – it requires, in many cases, a clean break with the past, and our natural human indecisiveness, and our inability to recognize that sometimes it's actually good to separate ourselves from some of the things in our past, is always going to get in the way of actually doing something!

It's not difficult to see the parallels with Ash Wednesday, is it?!

Ash Wednesday inexorably takes us to the places in our lives where we rarely sweep and clean

up.

The point of it is, though, is that it is the junk that I have stored up over the years that is often holding me back. The kind of brokenness in human relationships that I have often stored away in a corner because I did not know what to do with them, or was not brave enough to do the thing that needed to be done; the old behaviors and actions that continue to haunt my present: these can be found in my basement, in our attics, waiting for us to get around to doing something about it.

Such house-cleaning can be scary – because in facing the junk I actually am reintroduced to those things I’ve long forgotten, or tried to – like how much a person of prejudice, or bigotry, or anger I can be.

It doesn’t really matter what’s in my wallet – or yours – but what we’ve got stored away in our attics – and basements – that’s going to have the greatest effect on the way we live our lives and how we feel about ourselves.

Sorting through all that old junk often leaves dirty smudges on my hands or face or clothing – reminders of who I have been and who I am now and even who – as a result of what I have stored away – I am becoming. Ironically, the more productive our journey, the greater the likelihood we’ll be wearing evidence of the journey.

Ashes are evidence of our journey – a reminder that we’re willing to reach way beyond the “proper every-hair-in-place kind of spirituality for a dirty, chaotic, smudged, proclamation of the good news”.

And a reminder of our human side – the side that we so often hide from others and ourselves. We all have an attic or a basement that’s chaotically filled with junk we have collected over the years -- the things that we have done and ought not to have done. They are filled with the times when, to our own amazement, we have gotten down and dirty in ways that we thought we were not capable.

And ashes are a reminder to us that irrespective of the claim by some of us – perhaps all of us – that our attics or basements are pristine, well-ordered, and constantly attended to, the truth is, deep down, quite different.

In that world, too, this day is good news: there is good news. The ashes are a reminder of the invitation of this day and this season: to revisit those places we’re prefer to deny and to realize how patient and merciful God is.

That’s really the invitation of this day: to consider that we all have an attic – or a basement – that’s filled with stuff, and to consider what God can do with it – and, if we are willing to allow God to partner us – what we can do with it too.