

## Ash Wednesday 2014

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5.21)

When I was a child I had a strange aversion to wearing anything which had a label or logo on it. My poor mother had to search the length and breadth of clothes stores to find items which were plain, and completely unbranded.

I’m not entirely sure what the problem was, and I guess a psychologist would have a field-day with this childhood recollection. I was, it is fair to say, a slightly unusual child, and I imagine this particular neurosis was a pre-pubescent attempt not to be pigeon-holed, and to retain a sense of individuality.

Most *normal* children are label-obsessed. And the truth is that most of us are drawn to labels, wittingly or not. One cannot walk through the streets of Finsbury Park without seeing the ubiquitous Nike stripe, for example. When it comes to brands, we wear labels that project something of who we want to be. We associate ourselves with what that label stands for. In the case of a sports brand, it will be a healthy, energetic lifestyle. Other labels show our commitment to a cause, or a sense of loyalty and devotion. Think of the passion which is roused by the badge on a football shirt. And some labels are a display of love and intimacy: the name of a partner or a child, for example, indelibly tattooed onto the skin.

In baptism you and I were labelled. When the sign of the cross was made on our foreheads, we were indelibly labelled with the brand of Jesus Christ. And today, that invisible label is made visible, as that cross is retraced, this time with ash. And so, at the beginning of Lent, we publicly express our desire to be associated with what *this* brand stands for. We pledge our loyalty and devotion to the badge of our faith, the cross of Christ. And, on the part of our body which is most visible to others, we expose our love and intimacy Jesus, with whom we seek to walk in this holy season. The ashed cross on our foreheads is a sign of desire and longing to be united with him who was ‘made to be sin who knew no sin’.

More than this, the material with which this cross is marked reminds us of what it means to be labelled with Christ. As the cross associates us with Jesus, so the ashes remind us of those with whom Jesus particularly associated: the poor, the marginalised, the vulnerable, those denied justice. These ashes confront us in much the same way as the prophecy of Isaiah does:

*Is this not the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house,  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

Then there are those words which are recited as we receive the imposition of ashes:

*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.  
Turn away from sin, and be faithful to Christ.*

And so, this label reminds us not of *who* we are, but rather *what* we are. ‘You are dust, and to dust you shall return.’ Unlike the labels of the world, by which we seek self-aggrandisement, or by which we attach ourselves to something greater than we are, this label reminds us that we are frail human beings: repentant, and in need of God’s mercy and grace. These ashes encourage us to open ourselves up to our own vulnerability, however painful that may be, to expose our weaknesses and sin, and to allow God to come in and take over: to purify us, to make us whole again, to work with our disordered, fragile, disjointed selves.

It won't surprise you that, as a label-averse child, I wasn't particularly keen on being ashed on Ash Wednesday. I would grow my fringe (something I'm sadly unable to do now), and wash the ash off at the first available opportunity. There's still something of the child in me, who doesn't want to wear such an obvious badge, who doesn't want people staring in the street. Perhaps you are similar, secretly hoping that the cross imposed on your forehead today won't be too big; that you'll be able to get home before your neighbours see you wearing it.

But we should, of course, wear our ashes with as much confidence as we would any other brand or logo; indeed more confidently, more boldly. For the ashes we wear today are a witness: a witness to our desire to be associated with the one who associates himself with us; a witness to the love and the loyalty we have for the one who loved us since before the world came into being, and demonstrates his loyalty to us through sacrifice; a witness to the fast that we choose, to make the world a better and fairer place; and a witness to our willingness to confront our own fragility and vulnerability.

May all which this cross symbolises remain with us throughout this holy season of Lent, even as the ashes fade away. May we enter more deeply into the mystery of Christ's love, and, restored, reconciled and loved by him, become the righteousness of God.