

ASH WEDNESDAY

THE DISCIPLES WHO NOTICED THE MARK

Luke 9:51

I must have “seen” Ash Wednesday before having any idea of what it was. In my childhood, sometime in February or occasionally in March, I would notice someone with a dirty mark on their forehead—and then another person, and then another. It must have meant something, surely? (We were Scottish Presbyterians. Lent was not something we observed!)

Ash Wednesday was originally the day in the church year when people who were ordered to show public penitence for their sins began forty days of penance—outward displays of inward repentance. Sometime around the end of the first millennium the practice became more general. The symbol of this was marking the forehead with ashes. It was the sign that a person had begun a multi-week fast, with forty weekdays included. They were now setting out on an internal journey of the spirit that would end only with the celebration of Christ’s resurrection at Easter. The message was visible on their faces.

Luke tells us that shortly after Jesus had told his disciples about his forthcoming suffering, they began to notice

a mark on his face too. It was not a physical *mark*, but a different *look*—as though something within was manifesting itself in his demeanour:

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. (9:51)

Jerusalem had always been in his sights. At the beginning of his ministry he had been baptised with water from the River Jordan, which was already symbolically saturated with the sins of the people (3:1-22). But now he was heading towards the real baptism which his water baptism had signified: “I have a baptism to be baptised with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished” (12:50). Now the mark of death was beginning to become visible on his forehead. Now, for Jesus, the prolonged “Lent” that would lead to Calvary and Easter had begun.

On the road to Jerusalem, Jesus encountered a wide variety of people. There was something they all had in common: they were either drawn to him in their need or repelled from him by their pride. No one was neutral. The first of them were those disciples who had been told, but had not immediately taken in, the meaning of the look on his face (9:21-27). It was the outward expression of his inner “distress”. The question was, would it repel them or would they follow him?

But perhaps, before we travel any further along this road, we need a word of caution. The people we will meet, not least the disciples, are indeed endlessly interesting. But they are not the focus of the story. In watching them, we must never lose sight of Jesus; for if we do, all we are doing is meeting some fascinating people, and even seeing ourselves reflected in them (good things in themselves). But if that is all we see, we have missed the point. The real point is to see who Jesus is.

