

Using a Helpful Framework -- Ash Wednesday Homily
The Rev'd Shirley Smith Graham, St. Martin's Episcopal Church
Williamsburg, VA, February 18, 2015

It can be difficult to come to Ash Wednesday with enthusiasm. It's hard to regard this day in the Church's year as anything other than a downer. With a positive attitude you could think of Ash Wednesday as something unpleasant but good for you, like your yearly physical: you will go to the doctor, who will look at your lab results with objectivity, examine your organs and body parts without the cover up of your own biases or denial, and for 30 minutes you will be confronted with honesty about your mortal flesh and how, at some point, you will die: ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

But Ash Wednesday is only a downer if you perceive it as the day you look at the bad news: that you are mortal, formed of the earth, and to dust you shall return. Even people who like Ash Wednesday acknowledge that it's a heavy day: a day to admit how complicated life is, how confused and twisted your feelings can become, and how you sometimes fall short of loving God with your whole heart, mind and soul, and loving your neighbor as yourself – falling short of loving as a feeling as well as loving through practical, self-sacrificial acts.

Ash Wednesday truly would be a downer if it were the day you got only the bad news.

But Ash Wednesday is a day for good news too. If we've fallen into the habit of thinking of Ash Wednesday as "the bad news day," we've warped it out of shape from what it's supposed to be. So, if Ash Wednesday isn't meant to be a "doom and gloom day," what is it meant to be? Lancelot Andrewes summed it up, about 500 years ago in his prayer:

"By Thy resurrection raise us up
unto newness of life,
supplying to us frames of repentance."

Anglicans wrote long prayers into those days, so his prayer goes on for a few pages, but in this short excerpt you have the jewel that can shine a light on your path and lead you all the way through to Easter. Andrewes starts in the same place we do: it is not new news that we feel estranged from God sometimes, that we lose hope sometimes, that we fail, sometimes, to have the confidence that goes along with being the beloved children of God. It is not new news that we are faced with circumstances in our individual lives that challenge us to act in a Christian manner: indeed, sometimes these challenges are as taunting as the childhood bully who will not let us pass without slugging him. It

is not new news that sometimes we sin -- we fall short of loving God with our whole heart or we fail to follow one of God's instructions for happy living: honestly, who has never coveted his neighbor's car, or her neighbor's purse, let alone the more harmful sins? The news that we are frail human beings who sin is old news.

The new news -- or what may feel to us like new news today -- is that God gives us a framework for reshaping our lives, for stretching ourselves out of the distortion of sin and re-setting ourselves in the shape of creatures who are already being raised up into newness of life by Christ. From his already-resurrection Christ is enticing us to set ourselves on a framework of repentance, encouraging us to make a deliberate choice to look at ourselves as we really are, to decide to be sorry for our failings, and to use the energy from this sorrow to resolve to begin fresh again.

God's intention is never that we remain in a state of depression or despair about how awful we are. God's intention is that we use the tools of the Church to reshape ourselves during this Lenten season so that, at Easter, we authentically experience what we cannot get from chocolate eggs and marshmallow Peeps: "newness of life." By "newness of life" the Church means glimpsing now, even in our fleshly life, the joy that will be fully ours when we

are resurrected with Christ Jesus, in short, when we are in heaven. But how can we get to newness of life? How do we move from our current sharply-felt awareness of our sins and failings to newness of life? How can we climb out of the pit, away from our pride and our betrayals, to the peaks of God's glory?

Lancelot Andrewes gives us a useful tool in his prayer. Addressing the Christ, he implored Christ to raise us up [by] giving us "frames of repentance." The image of a frame -- or a framework -- to guide us and support us is such a helpful image. It's the kind of tool that we can pull out of our pocket each day and use to get good perspective. Andrewes imagines repentance, that practice of reflecting on our faults and asking forgiveness with the intention of changing our ways, as being a framework, like the frame of a house, or the frame of a weaving loom or the frame of a ship. It turns out that Andrewes, for all his world-class education and his role as a translator of the King James Bible, was the son of a ship's captain. As such, Andrewes would have known the importance of the framework of a ship. No one would expect a sailing vessel to be a safe and reliable ship unless the frame had been built properly so that all the beams, masts, and joists would be supported properly. Literally, the shape of the frame determines the health of the ship. The same is true of houses. If the framework isn't straight and proportionate, the wallboard won't hang right, the floors won't sit right, and the integrity of the house is at risk. Similarly, the frame of a

weaver's loom has the power to determine whether the weave of a rug will be tight and keep the design or whether the weave will be loose and loopy and result in a poor rug.

Repentance is a framework for us to use to rebuild our health -- at all times of the year but especially during this season of Lent. This framework has dimensions to it that are trustworthy: this framework will support us through honest self-examination; it will help us behold ourselves with the loving looks of God; this framework helps us find in Christ the strength and resolve to change our behavior and allow ourselves to be changed for the good. Andrewes' use of the frame as an image for repentance points us to a hopeful note: whatever is on a frame is a work in progress. You and I are works in progress. God is not done with us yet, and what God is leading us into is the health of his resurrection.