

## Ash Wednesday Homily

The collect for Ash Wednesday is one of the best known compositions of Cranmer's 1549 Prayer Book, drawing on Latin texts from the former rite for the blessing of ashes. To remind you, it runs thus:

**ALMIGHTY** and everlasting God, who hast made and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

This beautiful prayer is prescribed for use on every single day of the Lenten season, and I would like to encourage you all to observe that custom. Read this prayer when you make your daily devotions. Quickly, if it hasn't already, it will adhere to your mind and you will know it by heart, knowledge which is more than worthwhile.

I should like to make just one observation about its words, and that concerns the line: create and make in us new and contrite hearts. It is important to remember that there is a difference between creation and making. To make something is to form a new thing out of

already existing materials. To create something is to produce, without materials or assistance, something completely new. That is why the theologians of the Middle Ages were keen to point out that when we say God made the world, what we really mean is God created the world, brought it into being from nothing. And this distinction between creating and making should remind us that making is something we can all do. You and I can make something, transform one thing into another thing. But you and I cannot, in this proper sense, create, bring something from nothing. Only God creates. In fact, as I observed on Sunday when discussing Augustine, it is only the love of God which is truly creative.

The work of reconciliation which Paul is describing in his Second Letter to the Corinthians is truly something new, something which comes from nothing. In a wonderful phrase which we take too easily for granted, Paul speaks of God making him to be sin who knew no sin. Remember here that the New Testament word for sin - *amartia* - is an absence word, a word which means missing a target. Sin is defined not as something, but as a lack of something, in other words, a nothing. Out of this nothing, God himself creates. Christ - the incarnate love of God - takes this nothing and makes it into something, creates from that nothing the new thing to which Paul

refers when he tells us that if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.

The discipline, the learning, of Lent, is something which is truly creative. And therefore, by definition, it is something which is being done not by us but by God who is providing the teaching which enables us to learn, creating the new hearts which are able to contain the love of God poured into them through Christ, another phrase of Paul beloved of Augustine. The effect of this pouring - not a trickle, but a relentless tide, drawing ever closer - is the work of prayer and fasting, of focusing on the cross and re-learning what it means to be a creature of the creative love which gives meaning to our existence. The work of reconciliation never ceases, of course - God's love never stops flowing over into that which is created: if it did stop, creation could not be sustained. Likewise God's forgiveness is never lacking, always recalling us to his love, initiating again that relationship of grace. Lent allows our limited hearts and minds to institutionalise our hearing of that call, turning again as a community to fix our eyes upon the cross and begin to understand the new thing, the new creation which the love of God is bringing to fruition in each one of us.