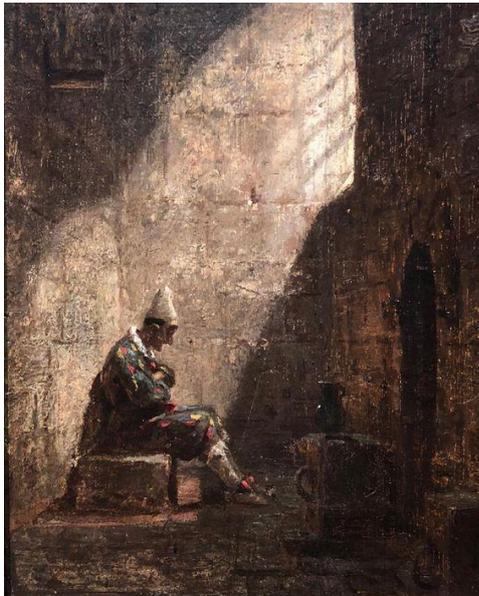


ASH WEDNESDAY

The Ash Wednesday Painting.

“Ash Wednesday” by Carl Spitzweg



The Ash Wednesday Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou 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

Just a word of thanks and explanation as we look at the first in our Lenten series of pictures related to the day's Collect. Thank you to Andrew Hingston who has advised on the project and who will also be taking part. Thank you to James Ratcliffe who has produced the posters and much of the publicity. I am no art historian, yet like most people am moved by paintings. We are surrounded by transient images in daily life from the media but the artist has gone to much effort to produce something of permanence – a creation which has something to say to us, to make us think. What he or she has to say (and we have female artists as well as male in the series) what the artist has to say to me may be different to you and I may well miss insights of importance. So there is an opportunity for anyone to add their own brief insight to help us all on this Lenten journey.

Carl Spitzweg was a German 19th century artist – a representative of the romanticist school. On this day which is also Valentine's day I should add that this has little to do with romantic love but is concerned with looking back in an idealised or romantic way to the medieval, emphasising emotion and seeking a cultural unity to join together art, nature, beauty, philosophy and science against the brutalism and materialism of the industrial revolution. They were conscious of the tension between the daily world and the supernatural creative genius.

In this painting entitled Ash Wednesday we have a clown but one not in a circus but in a dark cell. Far from being filled with joy and laughter the clown is glum and reflective. His head is bent. His arms are crossed, his face is in shadow. No longer does he represent Mardi Gras for the Carnival is over. No longer is he full of exuberance,

revelry, letting go of convention and laughing at life. Rather he is in a nearly empty stone room, the colour of ash and arid desert. Lent has begun. Despite his outrageous costume the clown sits and reflects, no longer does he try to make others laugh at themselves, at others, at him, for he has changed to the simplicity and introspection of the Lenten season.

The clown whose very profession it is to get others to look at him now looks at his inner being, his emotions and feelings – his inner room where he may pray to God in secret. As well as being here to entertain us with absurdity perhaps the clown also represents the folly and insincerity of so much human action. We are all intentional or unintentional clowns from time to time. In Spitzweg painting he realises in the words of the Collect that however insincere and mocking he may have become it is God who “hatest nothing that thou hast made and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent” Penitent he is in his cell. Today’s Gospel reminds us not to put on a front, not to be concerned how others see us but to be right with God. Herein is great hope and in the words of the Collect we plead “Create and make in us new and contrite hearts”. We do so with confidence.

This hope and optimism is also reflected in the painting. For the clown is bathed in light from an upper window. Here is an understanding of repentance and conversion, bathed in the light of God’s Son “that we worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness.” One commentator has pointed out that the composition of the clown, the window and the archway forms a narrative triangle. The dark archway, directly across from the clown shows us where he has come from. The window above lets in the light, and the rays point the way upward and invite the clown towards fullness, possibility and hope. The time for him is a crossroads, a change of direction from darkness to light, just as the season of Lent can be for us.

Derek Earis.