

LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR

An Ash Wednesday homily by the Reverend Dr. Anne Gavin Ritchie, February 17, 2010

There is a marvelous, luminous painting by Georges de la Tour. He painted during the same era as Rembrandt, and his use of light is strikingly similar. I put my personal reproduction of that painting on the table in the narthex. It is one of four renderings of Mary Magdalene. This version is called “The Repentant Magdalene”. (By the way, please remember that *nowhere* do the Gospels indicate that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. That legend comes from confusing one part of Luke’s text with another, probably for political purposes.) But that’s not the point; let me describe the painting.

The scene is set at night. Mary is seated before a mirror. A single candle provides the only light, which illuminates Mary’s face. She is not looking into the mirror, but gazing at the candle, which I suppose indicates her deepening spiritual enlightenment. Most tellingly, Mary rests her hand upon a skull, the traditional symbol of human mortality. The skull sits on a heavy book, presumably the Scriptures.

I love this painting because of its mysteriously calming quality. Candlelight plays with the shadows. Mary has a look of profound tranquility. She is at peace; Mary is reconciled with her personal history. She understands the *meaning* of life events, most particularly the presence of Jesus.

The skull is a critical part of the scene. It tells us that Mary is aware of her mortality. Even so, Mary is not afraid. Her love for and commitment to Jesus frees her from fear and enables her to look calmly into her own reflection.

Ash Wednesday is *our* time to acknowledge *our* mortality; *our* time to look into the mirror. Funeral services, like the service for our beloved Gia Adams, make the same point through remarkable liturgy. But when we attend a funeral, we’re focusing primarily on our sense of loss. We’re trying to come to terms with the reality that a person we care about is no longer physically present with us. We may forget that someday a funeral service will be held for *us*.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” There is no ambiguity in these words. You – and I – are going to die. We do not know the time or circumstances of our death. We only know that death will certainly come.

Death is frightening, particularly because no one living knows exactly what it is like. What we *do* know is that death cuts off everyday life as we’ve known it. We will be separated from our physical bodies. We will be separated from those we leave behind. What we’re going *towards* is impossible to foresee.

Some people respond to the ambiguity simply *ignoring* the fact of death. They don’t prepare wills; they make no provision for the people closest to them. They coast along, content in their fantasy that life will always be the way it is right now. Until it *isn’t*. Then they scramble to catch up with the unwelcome reality of dying unprepared.

Others deal with death through a fatalistic approach. “I’m going to die anyway, so it doesn’t matter what I do.” This is the “eat, drink and be merry” choice. These folks don’t deny the reality of death, but they take it as an excuse to make choices that can be destructive both to themselves and others. For them, life is a kind of cosmic joke. They see no reason to take responsibility for what they do or what they *fail* to do.

The Christian approach to death is that we accept it as real. We acknowledge that no one is getting out of here physically alive. But Christians know that physical death is not the end of the story. Our destiny is in God. In the meantime, *how* we live matters. It matters *tremendously*. That’s what I hear in the Scriptures; that’s what I see in that marvelous painting of Mary Magdalene.

In the powerful passage we heard as our first reading, the prophet Joel urges the people to “return to the LORD your God”; “rend your hearts and not your garments.” The bridegroom should leave his chamber, and the bride her canopy. In other words, “STOP!” *Stop... think* about what you’re doing; reflect on how you are spending the precious minutes of your precious days.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” These words are not said as a threat. They are spoken to remind us of *reality*. When we listen to these words, *really* listen to them; when we take seriously the fact that we’re not going to live forever, we realize that we have a choice. We can while away the precious moments of our days or... do the work required to find meaning in them.

It is worth looking at the expression of Mary Magdalene’s face in Georges de la Tour’s gorgeous painting. We see someone willing to accept her mortality, but not be defined by it. We see someone moving beyond surface images to the deeper reality, which is God.

We can look just as deeply, not only this Ash Wednesday, and not only this Lent. But *always*.