

Ashes and Dust

Usually at the pastor's invitation, we go forward, and as we walk forward, perhaps the words of Psalm 51 still ring in our ear and mind, especially the last, haunting phrase: "The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit: a broken and contrite heart. O God, you will not despise."

The pastor places a spot of ash on the center of our forehead, and he says to us the ancient words derived from the book of Ecclesiastes: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return (3.20, 12.7)." We then partake of communion and return to our places, properly reminded that we are no better and no worse than everyone else. Eventually we will take our place with our ancestors, returning to the earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

But not this year. In this pandemic year we will still hear those words, but from our homes because it is too dangerous for us to gather together. We will place those ashes on our own forehead, or the forehead of one of our family. And instead of partaking in communion, we will hear a prayer of longing to be in community for communion, and asking God to remember us in our affliction and distance.

Do we ever wonder why we come to church at all on this day known as Ash Wednesday, the day that marks the beginning of the Lenten season, a season of penitence, self-examination, alms-giving, and fasting? Who in his right mind would want to be reminded, so graphically as to be turned to ashes, that life is indeed terminal? Hasn't COVID reminded us enough of death and the finiteness of life. Everything within and around us screams denial of this basic fact. The Christian is, once again, at odds with the lies that make up so much of our daily lives.

If we believe the billboards as we commute daily to work, or the glossy advertisements in the magazines to which we subscribe, one might get the impression that no one is sick or tired or flawed in any way. In fact, we might conclude that everyone is about 20 years old, in perfect health and very, very fit. These contrived images don't represent my real world. Our friends and loved ones tend to be middle-aged, out of shape, a little overweight, bald (some of us), with eyeglasses and hearing aids. We deny the reality of death by pretending that we are all perpetually young and fit and rich and beautiful. COVID and disease, illness, cancer, accidents happen to others, not us. The Christian knows that the heart and the spirit are far more important than outward appearance, but we've not yet convinced the world of that truth.

Even Christians sometimes have difficulty accepting the inevitability of decline and death. We speak of one's having "passed away." WE have celebrations of life instead of wakes to express grief. Our funeral eulogies tend to flaunt the accomplishments of the deceased rather than proclaim the good news of Christ's promises. It's often hard for us to listen to the honest fears of one who knows that death looms rather soon. We'd rather try to cheer them up, look on the bright side. We fail to recognize that the "bright side" is indeed what lies ahead. Our bodies eventually will become dust, but there is more - Much more!

As a matter of practical Christian living, Matthew's gospel makes some strong points with regard to the right spirit of penitence, alms-giving, and fasting. Is your purpose in taking on the disciplines of Lent to be well thought of, by others and by yourself? If so, you will reap the appropriate reward. If, however, your purpose is to live a life more nearly in Christ, then outward appearance and admiration will have little meaning. Your reward will be that of the spirit. You will be living in integrity, because your heart and your behavior will have matched up.

"When you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you" (Matthew 6.2). This is a surprising, even amusing, idea, isn't it? We wouldn't think of making a big public show of the money we give to God. Or would we?

I hesitate to admit it, but I have never marked the box "anonymous" in my contributions to the agencies and organizations that I support with my little gifts. I may not be so blatant as to sound a trumpet when I write a check, but I wonder if I'm giving with a pure heart. I've yet to achieve Jesus' direction that I keep my generosity a secret, even to myself. I pray that, eventually, I'll write a check with my left hand (I am left handed) so that my right hand won't have any clue as to what I have done. Then, and only then, will my reward come completely from the Father, who sees in secret.

Do you go to church to see, and be seen by, others? If so, Jesus says you have your reward. If, however, you wish to be rewarded by God for your praying, go to your room and shut the door.

This does not mean that you are to neglect public worship. The church is a gathered community of Christians who are on a journey, and who wish to give thanks for God's love and providence by receiving the sacraments. This worship is done publicly. But for your private prayer, your time of tuning yourself into God's presence, take care that you do so in secret. Then there is no possibility of your compromising your prayers with the need to see and be seen.

"Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites." Their reward is in the looking terrible and having others comment on how terrible they look. Rather, when you fast, don't show it off. God, who sees in secret, will reward you.

Sometimes Christians are not very good examples of the joy of living in Christ. At times, Christians have interpreted Jesus' challenge to repent by going around with long faces, making every issue to be one of deadly seriousness. That remark represents the part of us that takes ourselves too seriously, that believes that

we are responsible not only for our own life but that of others, indeed the whole world. How we need to remember that it is Jesus Christ who forgives and saves. The ultimate responsibility rests with Him, not ourselves.

Ash Wednesday is a time of a new beginning. Christians are invited, by our churches, to the observance of a good and holy Lent. The days of passion and resurrection are deeply meaningful to us, and a careful preparation for them through this season of penitence and fasting will reward us.

As we worship, pray, give money, and perhaps even fast, let's keep clearly in mind the purpose for taking on these disciplines. On this Ash Wednesday, let's be clear that, like everyone else, we eventually will leave this life. Our bodies will become dust, indistinguishable from the eventual fate of every other creature. And as we take on the disciplines of Lent, let's pray for the strength and mind to take them on for the sole purpose of bringing us closer to the spirit of Jesus Christ.