

## REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE DUST, AND TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN

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Christ Episcopal Church

It has been said, that on Ash Wednesday, Christians attend their own funerals. It is no mistake that in our Ash Wednesday liturgy we contemplate our own mortality. And here at CEC, we are gifted with that presence of our mortality in the very view out our windows, the long long site of our graveyard, always present, always presence and in many ways a gift from the past.

Ash Wednesday calls us to remember that we are on a journey with only one ending: our deaths. The poet Rilke wrote in his time: God, give us each our own death, the dying that proceeds from each of our lives, the way we loved, the meanings we made, our need.

Our need as we once again embark on the Holy Road of Lent, is to reflect on death, our death, our death and rising in Baptism which makes us Christ's own, and prominently and firstly, the Death of our Lord Jesus Christ to which we each owe our lives.

In sixth grade, I had a literature teacher, whose name I can't remember, in a junior high school I can't recall, living on a street I don't know the name of, but what has never left my brain, was the poem she had us learn by heart, by a dour Scotsman, William Dunbar, about death. It begins and categorizes the relentness nature of the human fate of death, "I that in heill was and gladness, am trublit now with great sickness, and feblit with infirmatie: Timor Mortis conturbat me. The fear of death disturbs me.

Our plesance here is all vain glory, this fals world is but transitory, the flesh is bruckle, the Feynd is slee, Timor Mortis conturbat me. I had to look up the verses of the ballad, but not the chorus: The fear of death disturbs me. And it is that holy fear that we encounter on every Ash Wednesday as we are solemnly marked with the dust of our mortality, in stark contrast to our ego driven thought of our infinity.

This is the gift which we can find entering Lent marked as mortal. A chance to be given our death and to be called, shocked into pause, to examine our lives as if we were writing our own obituaries, and repent of the broken space that has come between us and our God. This is the moment in which we wake up and say with real gratitude, 'new every morning is the love our waking and uprising prove; through sleep and darkness safely brought, restored to life and power and thought'. We have another chance to make our lives over to God.

The point here is not to be afraid, or be morbid, or even to mourn but to reflect seriously and with honesty, on who we are. To look in the mirror and see who and where we are at this point and time, and to make meaning of our story so far and reflect on what parts of ourselves we have forgotten. What signs we can discern of the somethings we have allowed to come between us and God. And to grasp with relief, and hope that opportunity to be reconciled to God in Christ Jesus.

In Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, a composite of multiple letters, Paul tries to reconcile himself to the troubled community he has founded, and he begins with humility; death to himself.

He confesses: he is a fragile human person, like a clay jar, and only God can make of him completion and competence. In many ways, Paul's own admission of his need for repentance and reconciliation with God, mirrors the death and reconciliation we embrace and are gifted in our Baptisms.

I am always fascinated by the earliest accounts of the practice of Baptism in the ancient Christians church. It was a long process of repeated testing, repeated demands for repentance, for change, but it ended with that scene at the banks of flowing water, where the catechumens stripped themselves of all they had, down to the naked body of their birth, and were taken into the waters to be quite strongly and really drowned, pushed backwards under the water and held, until at the last, three times, repeating the Baptismal vows, they were pulled up suddenly to gasp air, acting out the dying and then rising to new life in Jesus Christ. They physically and spiritually left the waters and all of their former selves and lives behind, ended, and began as new creations, new human persons

reconciled to God, resurrected in Jesus Christ. Those early Christians knew that they had literally died with Christ, and in Him been given new life, a life of reconciliation with God.

We may not experience our baptisms, if we even can remember them, with that kind of clarity and yet, even in our Baptismal liturgy we are called to die to self and rise as new persons dependent and in great humility, only God's own. We repent: 'do you renounce Satan and all the wicked forces that rebel against God' 'do renounce the evil powers of this world, do you renounce your own sinful desires'? and then we turn - in the earliest liturgies, the newly baptized literally made a jump turn with their bodies at this juncture, from facing west to facing east, the direction of God's Son, as they went on to 'accept' Christ, only Christ Jesus, not themselves, not their own human delusions of empowerment, as Saviour, as in death to self, they sought only to live by God's grace and love.

On this Ash Wednesday, we practice our 'anamnesis', our recalling as though it were happening right now, right here, right really, our death to sin and evil, and our rising to Christ's new life of grace and love. We vow to die to sin, and rise to Love, once more in a right relationship with our God.

Lent is a time to reflect and review and relive our Baptismal covenant, and where we have failed to be faithful to that covenant, to confess and seek forgiveness and reaffirmation thru grace.

Jesus addressed the three fold practice of living with our deaths and our God given lives.

He encourages the practice of prayer, fasting and almsgiving as signs of true repentance, but as Eugene Peterson writes in *The Message*, Jesus tells us, "Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don't make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you will not be impressed." Our Gospel text encourages us to make sure our concern about who is watching is focused on God and on quietly giving of ourselves to other human beings. For the sake of the God who continues day in and day out to love us, care for us, see us with grace. "When you come before God, don't turn that into a theatrical production either...do you think God sits in a box seat?" Instead we are advised, admonished by Jesus, to place ourselves honestly and simply before God and then when

the focus is on Him, ask what He would have us do? How we can be truly helpful in loving Him and our neighbors?

We all know how hard that is. I used to laugh at myself, when I became aware, that after I did an act of 'humble' service in love for someone, I would notice that I had a Times Square ticker tape running through my consciousness saying, "Oh, Marcia, what a good girl you are!"

There are many well tested and traditional 'giving ups' for Lent, chocolate, Starbucks coffee, sweets, but the call of Jesus is to die to self. To become aware of our honest attachments to worldly idols whether it's cell phones or fast foods or shopping on Amazon, and to listen for God's call to be Christians in action in the world, building up justice and equality and compassion with our known and unknown neighbors. Here at Christ Church we have an unlimited opportunity to participate not only as individuals but as community in the God work of reconciling the world and all human persons to God's Love Self.