

Ash Wednesday

February 17, 2010

*You are dust and to dust you shall return.*

This is one of the most ancient phrases of Holy Scripture, coming right out of the early chapters of Genesis.

It forms the central theme of what we are about here today, on Ash Wednesday. We are all being reminded of our own mortality and our need for penitence.

But there is another theme at work within this sentence that we would do well to ponder as we enter this period of self-examination and renewal that we call Lent.

Part of our journey in Lent is about re-energizing our spiritual lives, setting aside time to be with God and letting that time do some transformational work on our broken and ailing lives.

Lent is a time the church tells us and or gives us permission to stop. This is one of the hardest words to hear in our fast paced always in motion culture.

On a day like Ash Wednesday though, it is appropriate to pause and take a hard look at what drives us.

Many of us are being run to exhaustion and near breakdown by fear. We live quiet lives of desperation.

If it is not fear that we might lose our jobs if we don't perform well enough, it is the fear that we'll lose our profits or our investors, or that our portfolios will drop in value.

Many of us have a passionate and not unwarranted fear about how we will be able to pay our bills next week or the next month.

The assumption that many of us make is that the answer to our problems is to keep moving forward or in financial terms moving upwards.

So we work harder, drive our bodies to the edge, shortening our tempers, and stripping the earth of precious resources.

But no one seems to be asking the question or attempting to answer, where are we headed, upwards towards what, forwards to where.

Maybe you have seen the billboard advertisement that once said, “those who have the most toys still die.

The advertiser strangely enough, is a national investment firm.

Even the commercial market itself can occasionally be confused about its goals and where we all headed.

We are guilty in so many ways and at so many levels of the corporate sin of chasing the wind.

And like most corporate sins it’s a societal ill that each of us has a very hard time finding our way out of. Our businesses fail if we don’t pay attention to the bottom line.

Our tables and plates are empty if we don’t compete and work hard.

Fortunately for us as Christians the reminder we hear today,

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Was not written by a market strategist.

In fact it is one of the earliest scriptural statements directly attributable to the voice of God. Like so many things on Ash Wednesday, it seems a grim reminder about our own darkness our own mortality.

That indeed maybe true, but there is also a great hope here, a perhaps even the beginning of an answer to our wrestling with our own corporate greed and fears.

We in the West have somehow forgotten that we are people of the earth. Remembering that we are dust is call to return to ancient wisdom that we are as much a physical people as spiritual people.

Spirituality and physicality are at their root deeply connected. The ancient Hebrews knew this too, and of course, did Jesus himself.

Jesus was not born after all into a sterile environment, cleaned and sanitized for his arrival. He was born into all the smells and grime of a barn, reaffirming the sanctity of even the dust and dirt that make us up and the rest of the natural world, too.

He understands the need for physical discipline, but not for the forwarding of wealth or status of self. Instead Jesus sees a fundamental need for balance and spiritual strength.

As he says in today's gospel, running around with our faces disfigured or parading our discipline in public will gain us nothing spiritually.

Rather it is the care of our bodies, the washing of our faces, and the quiet gentle acts of mercy and kindness to the needs of others that will nurture us as whole physical and spiritual beings.

Part of Lenten discipline should be reclaiming and reaffirming our physical selves and the physical selves of others, to seek a closer connection and relationship to the created order of this world.

And while the market forces driving our lives will not go away anytime soon, at least then we have a way affirmed by God in Christ to mediate the effect of competition on our over-scheduled lives.

So fast this Lent from the frenetic desperation that rules our lives.

Fast from lack of rest. Make time to find the sleep that is necessary to spend with people and the God whom we love and to give energy toward helping those in need.

And to remember to take off the shoes and feel the grass between your toes. May our reconnection with who and what we really are be our truest and best Lenten discipline.