

Ash Wednesday: Dust

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Wednesday, February 6, 2008.

The full moon comes very soon after the spring equinox this year, bringing Easter Day at almost the earliest possible date. So here we are already in Lent, moving from feast to fast even before the Chinese New Year begins. It has been barely over a month since we celebrated the birth of Christ, and barely a few weeks that we have celebrated the light of Christ shining in the world, in the season of Epiphany. Yet here we are. Last Sunday's Gospel, on the Transfiguration of Jesus, is always the Gospel reading on the last Sunday before Lent, ending the season on a mountaintop, with God speaking from the heavens. From transfiguration on the mountaintop, we now move to starvation in the wilderness. We have been brought back down to earth, down into the dust, as it were. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

For those of us who observe Ash Wednesday, there are two common, often unspoken, reactions to this service. The first is, "I'm not sure how to honestly talk about being wretched and lamenting my sins." The second is, "So what do I do with the ash on my forehead when I leave the church? Should I wipe it off so as not to show off my piety, or leave it on as a reminder of my penitence?"

I would like to suggest that these two thoughts are part of the same question: "When I leave this place today, what then?" We do need to leave here with more than just a smudge on our forehead. It should not be business as usual. We are here to begin a journey that ends with crucifixion and resurrection, death and then life. During the next forty days, we are invited to walk with Christ, following his steps in his ministry and his life, a journey that will end in his death and resurrection. Today we are given a map of that journey. Our liturgy gives us some landmarks to guide us, although the sternness of the language sometimes seems more like rocks to stumble over.

It is tempting to water down or even ignore the more difficult parts of Ash Wednesday in order to make our Lenten journey more palatable to us who are more accustomed to words of comfort and reassurance in church. We hear Joel saying: "*Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!*" The day of the Lord is a day of darkness and gloom? From our Christian perspective, we expect the day of the Lord to be a day of great joy. So it is tempting to distance ourselves from the call to penitence by telling ourselves that this is an old text, or just a metaphor, or irrelevant to us and our time, or an outdated idea because we know better now. But when we do this—when we close our ears to the harshness of some of the language, when we deny that it applies to us, when we inwardly tone down the message that calls for us to lament our sins and acknowledge our wretchedness—we lose the heart of Ash Wednesday and so move into Lent with a watered-down map of our journey with Christ. The heart of this holy day is not how loudly we lament our sins and acknowledge our wretchedness, as important as that might be for our own truth-facing. The heart is not the fasting or self-

denial that we will do, even though sometimes we spend an inordinate amount of time focusing on what we will give up for Lent. The heart is especially not self-improvement, as if our acts of self-denial are a kind of short-term late New Year's resolution but better because they get cancelled after only five weeks. The heart is not even the smudge on our foreheads, or the dust from which we came and to which we shall return. In other words, the heart of Ash Wednesday is not Ash Wednesday. This service and this day are not the end, only the beginning.

The invitation that the Church will extend to you in a minute is an invitation to the observance of a "holy Lent." What a powerful idea—a holy Lent, so that we can become a holy people for God. It is in this invitation to a holy Lent that we can find the heart of our journey into the wilderness of Lent.

I would like to suggest three ways in which Lent is meant to take us deeper into the heart of God, from the invitation that will be extended to you. Because the whole point is not that we are dust, but that we are precious, beloved children of God. The whole point is that we are precious enough to God that God would send God's only Son to redeem us and to reconcile us to God. The whole point is not that God wants us to be buried in ashes but that God wants us to be buried with Christ—and then risen with him. God desires not separation but relationship with us, not the death of sinners but life for us sinners. And here is where we begin, on Ash Wednesday, to

First, we learn that in the early Church, Lent was the time for converts to the faith to prepare for Holy Baptism. So for us also. We are invited to prepare for baptism or to revisit our baptism again and again, dying and rising, dying and rising with Christ as we look toward his dying and rising at the end of his own journey. Every act of prayer, fasting, self-denial, losing ourselves to be with Christ, will be a dying to self and rising to God.

Second, Lent was traditionally a time when people who had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled and restored to the fellowship of the Church. So too are we called to restore our relationships with one another. We are called to welcome rather than turn away, to give rather than hoard our love, to forgive rather than bear grudges. We might also look carefully at how in our daily lives we perpetuate an unjust society by our self-indulgent appetites and ways, our exploitation of other people, and all the other wrongs that we will confess in the Litany of Penitence.

And finally, Lent is a time, as the invitation goes, for us to "kneel before the Lord, our maker and redeemer."

In the far reaches of the galaxy a very long time ago, an old star dies in an explosion that sends its atoms across millions of light years. Eventually the dust created by this exploded star ends up in this part of the universe and becomes the building blocks for this world, and for life, including us. That we are made up of the remnants of dying stars should bring us to our knees in gratitude for the miracle of our creation by our maker. That we are then loved so much that God gave his only Son to walk with us on this earth and to give himself for us—this should bring us to our knees in gratitude for the

gift of salvation by our redeemer. We are not dirt. We are dust, and not just any dust—we are stardust. Have a holy Lent. Amen.