

Ash Wednesday, Year A
February 6, 2008

RCL
Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 103
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Today we are marked with a cross of ashes. What does it mean? How will it change our lives?

Some of us will heed the warning in the gospel of Matthew, the warning not to pray and fast so that you may be seen by others. Some will wash the ashes off after the service.

Others will let the symbol on their foreheads remind those they meet in the course of their daily lives that this is a holy day. They will wear the ashes throughout this day. The choice is yours.

Chiefly, though, the ashes are a reminder for us, each of us who comes forward to receive them. A reminder, first, of our mortality.

I have presided at three funerals already in this quite new year and each time, at the graveside, I am called upon to say, “we commend his body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. We will all return to the earth, out of which God created the first human being. Adam from ‘adamah’, which in Hebrew means ‘earth.’

We are not God. We will come to the end of our earthly lives. Our bodies will return to the dust. And the ashes today are a reminder.

They remind us also of repentance. In the time before Jesus came to live among us, when the books of Hebrew Scripture that we call the Old Testament were written, the prophets called the people to repentance. And when they did repent their sinful ways and turn to God they showed their remorse by covering their faces with ashes and by putting on sackcloth, which was rough and irritating to the skin. They fasted and prayed and begged God’s forgiveness.

We, too, are called to repentance. The ashes are a sign that we accept God’s demand that we examine our lives and seek to become what God desires of us. We promise to devote time to prayer, to deny ourselves something that will get our attention, and to serve others selflessly, after the model of Jesus. The ashes are a reminder of our commitment to keep a holy Lent.

But for all the penitence they place on us, and the sober reminder of our mortality, these ashes we will wear are also the mark of our salvation. Because they form the shape of the cross.

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Though we come before Christ in humility today, seeking forgiveness, we are also assured that he cares enough for us, each of us, to give his life for us. The ashes also remind us that while our bodies will die our spirits will live eternally in the company of the saints in light.

This is the gift to us of our savior Jesus Christ in fulfillment of the prophecy spoken by Isaiah – “If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness,” says the prophet Isaiah. “The Lord will satisfy your needs in parched places and make your bones strong. And you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.”

We accept these ashes today. May they remind us of the opportunity we have in this season of Lent to become more completely the people God created us to be.

Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria