

ASH WEDNESDAY B

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

BCP 265

The season of Lent begins with one word: **Remember.**

“Remember,” says priest or minister as a cross of ash and dust

is traced on our brows, ***“that you are dust,***

and to dust you shall return.”

It is a sober beginning to the serious business

of Lenten prayer and penitence.

As we reflect on those things that have defined our lives

for good or evil and made us who we are,

we also remember that we share a common fate and end.

“In the midst of life we are in death,”

is the way the burial liturgy of the ***Book of Common Prayer*** puts it.

“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

Our time together is short, and our journey has an end.

The ashes of this day bear an uncanny resemblance to

what will be left of us all a thousand years from now.

They bring us together as nothing else can.

A NASA scientist participating in the recovery of
the Stardust space probe describes it this way,

***“All the atoms on earth and in our bodies were in stardust
before the solar system formed.”***

And, he might have added, to stardust they shall return.

On **Ash Wednesday**, we are brought back down to earth
that we might become heirs of the promised kingdom of heaven.

Our Lenten season of repentance originates
in the dust and fragments of what we have done
and of those things we have left undone.

The withered remnants of once green palm branches,
burned on Shrove Tuesday and reduced to the ash
of today's solemn Ash Wednesday ritual,
bring to mind the setbacks and regrets of the year gone by;
those things we might wish to forget but somehow
cannot because they have been seared into our memory.

The dust of our failings and sin reminds us of our common heritage.

Across nave and chancel our shared human fate is on display

for all to see.

Remembering what has come before

is not a bad way to start anything important.

We recall the milestones of our lives – the births, baptisms, weddings, and graduations. They provide stability and strength in a world grown ephemeral and uncertain.

But most of us also remember our own vulnerability and deficiencies and our shame at how we have wounded others.

We recollect these things not because we can alter what has been but because in the act of remembering and repenting we are transformed and made new.

Like sparrows bathing in dry sand, we are paradoxically cleansed and renewed in the dust of our Ash Wednesday remembrance.

All that we do as the people of God is in some measure

a recollection of what God has done for us.

The Jews, our spiritual ancestors, still celebrate Passover.

They commemorate events thousands of years ago

when God led Moses and the people of Israel
from burning bush and through scorching desert sands
into the freedom of the Promised Land.

To this day, the Jews begin the feast of Passover
with a recitation of the great events of their history and redemption.
They dare not forget who they are nor where they came from.

As Christians, remembering takes us back to our roots in the cross.
That is where we come from.

At our baptism, the priest or minister anointed us with oil
in the sign of the cross, and we were

“marked as Christ’s own for ever.”

In our daily prayers we cross ourselves in the name of the Trinity.

And as we approach the altar table on Sunday morning
to receive the communion elements,
the celebrant reminds us to

“take them in remembrance that Christ died for you.”

The cross of ash on our forehead today conforms us to

the image of the crucified One, the Word Made Flesh,
through whom in the expression of the Creed,

“all things were made.”

We come from the Father, the Creator of the dust
and sinew of which we are formed.

And through Christ we return to the Father,
giving back our mortal and fallen nature sanctified
and renewed in the death of him ***“who knew no sin,”***
as Paul explains today in our second reading.

In Christ, we ourselves ***“become the righteousness of God.”***

Our Lenten journey begun today will draw to a close on Good Friday
in the full meaning of the cross.

Our contemporary world, like that of Jesus' day,
is distinguished by violence at home and war and terror abroad.

How can one find hope at the crossroads
of such suffering and anguish?

Perhaps it comes only in knowing that
the contradiction of the cross is in reality the paradox of life.

In the cross, the order of the universe is transformed,
and evil and pain are overcome.

We remember that life and its meaning are not found in
length of days, but in how we live our lives.

“Put oil on your head,” Jesus tells us

in today’s Gospel account from Matthew, ***“and wash your face.”***

Put away your gloom.

His words bring to mind the water and chrism of baptism
and the life won for us through his death.

It is almost as if he, along with our neighbors and co-workers,
has seen us leaving church today with our smudge of ash.

He counsels us not to ***“look dismal”*** or smug,

as some might who practice their piety before others
and seek only praise and a reward for their efforts.

Penitence is neither a sign of despair nor a badge of merit.

It is an evocation of hope and regeneration and a way of life.

Our Lenten renunciation is in reality a celebration of the kingdom
so close at hand.

Our spiritual sacrifices and acts of penitence

are not ends in themselves but an assurance of God's love

at work within us.

To give ourselves away as Christ gave himself for us

is to embrace redemption and life. ***"Now is the acceptable time,"***

Paul tells us. Our Lenten journey has begun.

It takes us to Calvary but it does not end in death.

From the ashes of our sin and shame,

God will raise us up to new life in the resurrection of his Son.

May it be so for each of us! Amen.