

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Wednesday, February 22, 2023

Ash Wednesday

The Solemn Liturgy of Ash Wednesday

12 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

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From dust to glory

The two ancient stories of creation in the Book of Genesis paint a beautiful picture of how God intended humankind to be stewards of what he had created. In the first story of creation, when God made the heavens and the earth and all that is within them in six days, the culmination of that creative act was the creation of Adam and Eve in his own likeness: *“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’”* (Genesis 1:26) Everything that God had made he declared to be good, but it was only after the creation of man and woman in God’s image that God declared his creation to be *very* good. The relationship between humans and the created order is, therefore, central to our understanding of the relationship between God and those whom he created. In the second story of creation, God literally gets his hands dirty in the creation of Adam: *“The LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”* (Genesis 2:7) The breath of life that comes from God animates us as human beings, made in his image; makes us truly alive until the day we take our last breath and die.

The story of the fall in Genesis, reminds us of the symbiotic relationship between Adam and Eve and the created order for, once they had rebelled against God, God had to remind them from whence they came: *“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”* (Genesis 3:19)

In a few moments, we will be invited to receive ash on our foreheads and hear words that will remind us of our mortality – *Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return.* It is easy to think that these ashes are to make us feel in significant; to remind us of the sin that separates us from God; of the filthiness that so often pervades our hearts and minds. And, yet, this dust is also a reminder of the relationship we have with the created order and the way that things are meant to be. Could it be that this ash is far more than a reminder of human frailty and, rather, a sign of glory?

There is a beautiful hymn written by a Benedictine sister at Stanbrook Abbey in England that has these two poignant verses:

*When God made man, he gave him all the earth,
All growing things, with every bird and beast;
Then Adam named them at the Lord’s command,
Subdued the greatest of them, and the least.*

*In his own image God created man,
And when from dust he fashioned Adam’s face,*

*The likeness of his only son was formed:
His Word incarnate, filled with truth and grace.*

That symbiotic relationship that humankind was intended to have with God and with the universe was not lost for ever at the fall. As we read in Paul's letter to the Galatians, "*When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.*" (Galatians 4:4)

Or as the hymn puts it, '*when from dust he fashioned Adam's face, the likeness of his only son was formed.*'

Dust, therefore, can also be charged with the glory of God. These ashes are not just a reminder of our mortality – they are, ironically, also a reminder of the glory that is to come, for what is this ash? It is the chemical element carbon – the most common chemical element found in the universe, and the second largest element found in the human body. In essence, it is the stuff of which we are made. But, my friends, carbon exists in our planet in different forms, so that what we see here today as mere ash, also has the potential to become the most precious forms of carbon on the planet – formed by intense heat, and pressure inside the earth itself – a diamond.

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul says, "*For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.*" (1 Corinthians 15:21-22)

The imposition of Ashes is, therefore, not intended to make us feel worthless; far from it, it is a symbol of our human journey towards God – a response to the invitation from him to rediscover that we are all made in his image. This was brought home to me in a powerful way this morning when, during the 8am mass, I took the ashes onto 5th Avenue for that wonderful New York tradition 'Ashes to go!' Hundreds of people were rushing past as usual, but many stopped and came over for their ashes. In nearly all cases, they approached me with a beaming smile! Even though I am a little perplexed by their regular response to the words "Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return," which is, invariably, "Thank you!" there is something beautiful going on as they connect their real lives with the ash and with their journey. A whole group of Mexican workers climbed down from the scaffolding to line up; wearing all their harness gear, they removed their hard hats and put them proudly under their arms to receive their ashes so faithfully. Concierge and Doormen came out in their shirt-sleeves; parents pushing toddlers in push-chairs. But it was when a bus suddenly screeched to a halt, and the door opened, and a wonderful larger-than-life black female bus driver ran across the sidewalk with a broad smile and said "I can't get to mass – can I have my ashes?" that I simply stared in awe. She ran back, got in the driver's seat and off she went. I marveled at the faith of this wonderful kaleidoscope of people who showed no shame or misery, but *joy* as they recalled their mortality and then went on with their day.

Let me end with a poem by the artists Jan Richardson, titled 'Blessing the Dust.'

All those days
you felt like dust,
like dirt,
as if all you had to do
was turn your face
toward the wind
and be scattered
to the four corners

or swept away
by the smallest breath
as insubstantial—

did you not know
what the Holy One
can do with dust?

This is the day
we freely say
we are scorched.

This is the hour
we are marked
by what has made it
through the burning.

This is the moment
we ask for the blessing
that lives within
the ancient ashes,
that makes its home
inside the soil of
this sacred earth.

So let us be marked
not for sorrow.
And let us be marked
not for shame.
Let us be marked
not for false humility
or for thinking
we are less
than we are

but for claiming
what God can do
within the dust,
within the dirt,
within the stuff
of which the world
is made
and the stars that blaze
in our bones
and the galaxies that spiral
inside the smudge
we bear.

