

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Wednesday, March 05, 2025

Ash Wednesday

The Solemn Liturgy of Ash Wednesday

5:30 pm

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

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Live Life – Live Lent

Some years ago, I visited a Benedictine Monastery in England. The Abbot met me and welcomed me warmly. We went to the refectory for lunch. *"I must apologize that our hospitality will not be to its usual standard, father,"* he said, *"since it is Holy Week, we are only having three courses and there is only one wine today."* I smiled and wondered what I might have received had it been St. Benedict's Day! Sometime later, I visited another Benedictine Monastery, this time in Belgium. It was a very grand monastery attached to an old university, and there were beautiful portraits of the former abbots and the current abbot. Before the concert our choir was going to perform in the Monastic Church, we were served dinner. I was disappointed that not one of the monks was present; I knew that the community was now small, but still, it would have been nice to have been welcomed. A man in a white tee-shirt and apron was serving food at my table, so I asked him, *"Do you think we might be able to meet the abbot?"* He smiled at me and said, *"I am the abbot!"* and went back to the kitchen!

Hospitality is important to Benedictines. You may, therefore, be surprised to hear the beginning of rule number 49 from the Rule of St. Benedict: *"A Monk's life should at all times resemble a continual Lent, but few have such virtue."*

A life that resembles a continual Lent? When I first read that, it sounded to me that the monastic life must be a very dreary one, filled with penance and self-denial. But, as I grew older, I realized that Benedict was talking about a kind of Lent that I was yet to discover – a Lent that was, indeed, so joyful that one would want to cultivate it and try to live by it all year round. The kind of Lent that is so clearly spelled out for us in the scriptures today.

For years, as a priest in the Church of England, I said or sang one of the prefaces to the Eucharistic Prayer for the first weeks of Lent without allowing the words to take root in my own life: *"Each year you give us this joyful season when we prepare to celebrate the paschal mystery with mind and heart renewed. You give us a spirit of loving reverence for you and of willing service to our neighbour. As we recall the saving acts that give new life in Christ, you bring the image of your Son to perfection within our hearts."*

How often had I misunderstood the true meaning of Lent! How often had I seen the disciplines of Lent as being an end in themselves rather than as a means to an end. To live a life that is continually Lenten in character does not mean living a miserable life at all! To live a life characterized by Lent means to be more attuned to the generous hospitality of God.

Now I understand why St. Benedict prays that we should strive to live a life characterized by the season of Lent because it is a joyful season; a season whose whole purpose is to prepare to celebrate! A season of love for God and expressed through love offered freely to our neighbors. And all because of the salvation that has been given to us by Jesus, whose image in each one of us will be brought to perfection because of our Lenten discipline, and not in spite of it!

A poem by Walter Brueggemann – Marked by Ashes

Ruler of the Night, Guarantor of the day . . .

This day — a gift from you.

This day — like none other you have ever given, or we have ever received.

This Wednesday dazzles us with gift and newness and possibility.

This Wednesday burdens us with the tasks of the day, for we are already halfway home
halfway back to committees and memos,
halfway back to calls and appointments,
halfway on to next Sunday,
halfway back, half frazzled, half expectant,
half turned toward you, half rather not.

This Wednesday is a long way from Ash Wednesday,
but all our Wednesdays are marked by ashes —
we begin this day with that taste of ash in our mouth:
of failed hope and broken promises,
of forgotten children and frightened women,
we ourselves are ashes to ashes, dust to dust;
we can taste our mortality as we roll the ash around on our tongues.

We are able to ponder our ashness with
some confidence, only because our every Wednesday of ashes
anticipates your Easter victory over that dry, flaky taste of death.

On this Wednesday, we submit our ashen way to you —
you Easter parade of newness.

Before the sun sets, take our Wednesday and Easter us,
Easter us to joy and energy and courage and freedom;
Easter us that we may be fearless for your truth.

Come here and Easter our Wednesday with
mercy and justice and peace and generosity.

We pray as we wait for the Risen One who comes soon.

Walter Brueggemann (b. 1933)
