

ASH WEDNESDAY



Psalm 103.13 "As a father cares for his children,
so does the Lord care for those who fear him;
For he himself knows whereof we are made;
he remembers that we are but dust."

Thirty-something years ago on Ash Wednesday, I was serving as a Canon at the Cathedral Church of St. Mark in Minneapolis. And as I went down the communion rail imposing ashes that year, I recall coming upon a young couple that I had counseled a year or so before, and whom I later married. It was a joy to see them again, for I remembered them with great fondness, but I had not seen them at church in quite a while. The reason for their absence was now apparent to me, for there in the young woman's arms was a baby, an infant barely a few weeks old, an adorable little child, so small and alert, with bright eyes and wisps of black hair upon her crown, and frenetic little fingers. My heart

was filled with gladness at the sight of this young family, so full of life and promise.

Thus it pained me to go on with the service, to lay my hand upon the baby's warm little head and place my thumb upon its brow, leaving a dirty imprint of ashes while whispering the words, "Remember, O child, that dust thou art, and unto dust thou shall return." I saw the somberness in the eyes of the parents as I imposed ashes upon their little baby, and I felt the mother instinctively clutch her infant closer to her breast at my words.

It was painful to be forced to acknowledge in the presence of this child and young family, that death and the grave await us all; that no matter how young we feel or how immortal we act, no matter how much life there seems left to live, as so clearly evidenced by the presence of this infant child, we are all made of dust, just as Adam was fashioned from the earth. We are alive for but a little while, and oh, how quickly it passes before we return from whence we came.

I think of my own children now, they are not my babies any more, they no longer need my hand to walk across the street or to find their way in life. Their lives are passing before my eyes so quickly at times that it is easy to lose track of the years. Our lives are passing quickly too.

Oh, my brothers and sisters, we are not here practicing our piety before others with this service and with these ashes in order to be seen by them. We are here instead soberly reminding ourselves of the shortness and uncertainty of life, and of the

need to live out our lives in earnest, of the need to be mindful of what we are doing with our lives and where we are placing our treasures. Heedful of the true gift of life, which God has given us to share with one and another; the gift of life with which we are called by the prophet to loose the bonds of injustice, to set the oppressed free, to share our bread with the hungry, to cover the naked, and to bring the homeless poor into our houses. We have all festively waved our palms on Palm Sunday and promised to follow Our Lord, to follow in The Way of Jesus, even into Jerusalem, to take up our own crosses and walk the path to Calvary, but we have all failed at so many different times at so many different levels in so many different ways to do all that we can do. We have so many times failed to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. And we are sorry. When we think upon it all, we are oh so very sorry.

So we take up last year's palms and burn them as an ancient sign of our failures and our sins, and as a reminder of our mortality. Then we mix those ashes with the holy oil of baptism, whereupon we were once sealed upon the brow and marked as Christ's own forever. Then we add some of the holy oil of unction, and pray for healing and for wholeness, for God's mercy and forgiveness, for God's grace and love. We pray for God's guidance in our lives, that we may see what God would have us do with the remainder of our time, and then we pray that God will grant us the courage to pursue that end, confident that God has already provided the grace to accomplish it.

I beseech you, my brothers and sisters, to spend some time this Lent reflecting upon your life, and giving thanks to God for the gift of life and breath, and the many blessings we have received thereof, and also, to consider what you want from life, and how you are going about to get it. Where are your treasures? Where is your heart? Go into your room sometime this Lent, and shut the door, and talk to your Father in heaven, in secret, in openness and honesty, with tears and with woe, and maybe with laughter too, but also with hope and confidence, in love and in faith, facing the harsh realities of our life, and of our death. It may be frightening to do so. It will be probably be painful and somewhat sorrowful. But it will also be real, and you will feel alive.

So let us live our lives to the fullest, with our eyes open, and our hearts set upon the promises of God where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. Let us love one another, as Christ loved us, and gave himself for us, as an offering and sacrifice to God. For:

“As a father cares for his children,
so does the Lord care for those who fear him;
For he himself knows whereof we are made;
he remembers that we are but dust.”

AMEN.