

Our Mortality

A Homily for Ash Wednesday

Today is an important moment in the life of the Church – and it's an important day for each one of us here. We leave ordinary time behind, and enter into the season of Lent. A journey we share with each other, but most importantly a journey we share with Christ. And we begin this journey by reminding ourselves of our own humanity and mortality with the imposition of ashes and with these evocative words:

'Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. Turn away from your sin and be faithful to Christ.'

There is much wisdom in these words, there is much wisdom in these ashes.

For many of us who have been near death or had loved ones die, we know how suddenly what is most important in life rises to the surface. And this is the invitation of Lent, to realign our priorities. In remembering that we will die, we are called to remember God who is the source of our life.

But how does one prepare for death, it is something we seldom talk about. John Robinson in his memoirs, speaks powerfully of the time when he was informed by doctors he had only six months to live. He writes, 'My first reaction was naturally of shock – though I also felt liberated, because as in limited-over cricket, at least one knew the target one had to beat. But my second reaction was: 'Six months is a long time. One can do a lot in that. How am I going to use it?

'The initial response is to give up doing things – and it certainly sifts out the inessentials. My reaction was to go through the diary cancelling engagements. But I soon realised that this was purely negative. I remembered the remark of a dear friend who died of cancer. He said, 'I can't die: my diary is too full.'

And so I began to realise that 'preparing for death' is not turning away from things of the earth, for things of heaven. Rather, for the Christian it is preparing for 'eternal life', which means real living, abundant living, starting now. Giving the most to life and getting the most from it.'

Sadly, Lent, has all too often been seen, as a morose season in which we all give up something in order to prepare ourselves for eternal life. The salvation promised and hoped for requires us turning our backs on the joys of this life and the beauties of the earth. We are encouraged to train our eyes upon heaven, forsaking time for eternity. But is salvation really about escaping this world or rather seeing everlasting beauty in each passing moment?

Plato once described time as the moving image of eternity. We are constantly dying, but we are also constantly living as we reflect God's vision in the world of the flesh. This day, this moment, is a "thin place," for God is with us, revealed in flesh, blood, and healing touch.

And so to today's gospel reading...

It is either a mean streak or a sadistic sense of humor that causes the lectionary to assign this text for Ash Wednesday. What were they thinking when they paired this text about private and discreet spirituality with today's very public ashing ritual?

Well, may I suggest that even in the most private of rooms there is dust, there is dirt, there is the stuff of life.

Have you ever been up to the loft without coming away with some smudge on your face, or hands, or clothes just because you have been up there? And the further you enter, the greater likelihood is the dirtier you will get.

And may I suggest it is the same with prayer and with life. The more we pray, the more we realise our own failings and faults, but we also become more aware of our cares and concerns. Our commitments - the things that really matter to us, the things that shape us and form us. Deep within all of us, there is plenty of dirt, but there is also plenty of earth, plenty of the stuff of life, plenty to treasure.

So this year, as well as giving some things up for lent, I am also keen to rediscover some of the treasure, some of the stuff of life, that is a part of who I am, but for one reason or another, I've neglected or forgotten about. And one of those things is exercise and in particular, jogging. I love running, it makes me feel better, both physically and mentally, but these last few months it's fallen a bit by the wayside. And so, I've bought a new pair of running shoes. At the moment, they are still in the box, in pristine order, and haven't yet been taken out of their original package. They are lifeless, they have no story, no marks, no mud. But as soon as I start running, they'll get dirty. The tread will change, they will take shape.

And so it is with our prayer, and with our lives, whether individually or corporately, we need not be afraid of the dark or the dirt. In a way, the darkness and dirt that we encounter, not only makes us who we are, but is also a measure of our commitment. Just as a race is there to be run, so life is there to be lived.

So, in a few moments, as we pause to contemplate our mortality and receive the sign of the cross in ash, 'let us not be afraid, but give thanks for the gift of life'. Yes, we are dust, but we are earthly dust, wonderfully human and wonderfully made.

And my prayer for each one of us, is that this Lent, we will all grow closer to Christ, our companion and inspiration, who knows something of

darkness and light, of the earth and of commitment, of running the race,
and living life to the full.

Tim