

Ash Wednesday 2015

Dust and ashes are Good News: they point us toward the power and love of God – both at the beginning and at the end. And they remind us that, because of this Good News, we are called – as we live between dust and dust – to repent and to return. To return to our risen Lord. That’s what “repent” means: to turn, to change the direction in which we are looking and moving, and to look and to move in a new direction.

Nowadays you really have to go searching if you want to show the younger generation what ashes are like. Most people don’t burn wood or coal to heat their homes. Outdoor grills are powered by gas rather than charcoal for most people. Thankfully, fewer and fewer people smoke cigarettes, so no ashes accumulate in ashtrays in public or private places.

But there was a time when ashes were commonplace. People burned things all the time. Leaves in the Fall, cook stoves and fireplaces, trash piles, ashes were the end of the road for many a thing. With the rise of cremation for burial of the departed, someone’s ashes or “cremains” as often call in the funeral profession, are the sure and certain final end of mortal life.

The rapid oxidation of matter reduces it to its essential elements. Looking at a pile of ashes, it’s not much different than a pile of dry soil, finely rendered into dust. “Earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes” are words from the BCP we are given to speak over the body of the deceased at burial, commending the soul of the departed to Almighty God and committing the body to the ground.

On this Ash Wednesday we are mindful of the ashes from which we were created. The very dust is good in God’s eyes. With egos in check, we are keenly aware of our weaknesses, frailties, wrongdoing and shortfalls.

As we begin our observance of Lent on this Ash Wednesday, we are made mindful of our mortality. But we are also called to remember that we are made by a God who rejoices to create and renew again. We are being given another opportunity to grow, change, and improve. The word for this is repentance.

If you’re in Chicago and you’re driving to New York going west, then you just won’t ever get there – no matter how many times you pull over to the side of the road, stop the car, get out and apologize. To “repent” is to turn around.

I think all of us can remember a time in our lives when all was well. It might have been brief, but remains a highlight. Those happy moments of achievement, gratitude, accomplishment, success, whatever. I remember the joy of passing an examination after hard and long studying, or the rewards of a blooming garden after backbreaking yard work. Or what about seeing children or family members attain their dreams or goals.

Repentance can take us back to those crossroads in life and choose again the right path, the right decisions.

Repentance is really not something we can just think ourselves into; it is not something to which we can pay lip service and have happen. It depends on concrete action. We don't think ourselves into a new state of being. We live and we act ourselves into it.

Both Holy Scripture and the accumulated spiritual insight of our tradition tell us that the classical and ancient disciplines of prayer, fasting and giving are powerful helps as we hear and move toward obeying God's call to return. They are universally recognized ways of keeping our journey moving in the right direction. As the saying goes, "Try it —you'll like it."

For God is with us – in the beginning, at the end, and even now as we live in between. Let us truly repent, return to the Lord – in joyful obedience. For he who created us is calling us to him. To this end, we are given the special gift of Lent – a time to allow us to hear that call with some real depth, and to respond.

Let us repent for being reckless, negligent and sometimes ungrateful for this precious gift of life. And from this day forward, let us never take another day for granted. Amen.