

The season of Lent begins with the command to Remember. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” It is a sober beginning to the serious business of Lenten prayer and penitence. As we reflect on those things that have defined our lives for good or ill and made us who we are, we also remember that we share a common fate and end. “In the midst of life we are in death,” is the way our burial liturgy puts it. “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” I think we’ve all lived through that in a very concrete way this last year. People we know have died, some of them needlessly. People have lost their jobs, their ability to exercise their vocations, their homes. Church services are different, and some say less fulfilling because we have to meet over the computer rather than in person. We have lost the ability to have a good meal out, to go to the movies or theater, to simply enjoy so much of what we used to take for granted. In many very real ways, the world is in ashes around us, and we do not know what resurrection will look like, nor when it will come.

And yet, this year as in years past, the ashes of the day unite us as perhaps nothing else can. Just because we have lived through so much together, I think we have a more visceral understanding of what it means to “go back to the dust.” We are told by science that everything here on earth, down to the atoms in our bodies, is made of stardust, just like the rest of the universe. It’s a heady thought, that we carry the universe in our bodies. But on Ash Wednesday, we are brought back down to the dust of the earth, so that we might become heirs, not of the universe, but of the Kingdom of Heaven, through the way of the Cross.

Our Lenten season of repentance originates in the dust and fragments of what we have done and what we have left undone. The burned remnants of once green palm branches bring to mind the setbacks and regrets of the year gone by; those things we might wish to forget but somehow cannot because they have been seared into our memory. The dust of our failings and sin reminds us both of what has gone before and of our ultimate fate.

Remembering what has come before is not a bad way to start anything important. The milestones of our lives – births, deaths, baptisms, weddings – provide stability and strength in an unstable and uncertain world. But most of us also remember our own vulnerability and deficiencies and our shame at how we have wounded others. And this year we have many more things to mourn, corporately if not individually: Our negligence in doing the things that doctors say will help control the spread of COVID until we can get vaccinated. Our desires to “go back to normal” when we know that normal is dangerous to the most vulnerable of our siblings. Our centuries-old denial of the dignity of every human being, our refusal to see Christ

in those who differ from us, our complicity in the systems that push people to the margins and make life difficult for those who are too easily seen as “other” rather than being acknowledged as our siblings in Christ.

We recollect these things not because we can alter what has been, but because in the act of remembering and repenting we are transformed and made new. Like chinchillas, little animals that bathe in dust in order to clean themselves, the ashes of remembrance are paradoxically cleansing and renewing. So too are our Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and charity. These disciplines, which so many think of as negative things, help us to be in better relationship with God and with others.

Our lessons help us remember what we are supposed to do. Take a look at Isaiah, which reminds us that Ash Wednesday and Lent are not just times to meditate on our individual failings and mortality (although of course it’s certainly that as well!) It’s also a time to acknowledge the sins we commit as a community – and those are often harder than individual sins to acknowledge or do anything about. Here’s the thing – our individual disciplines are what make us strong enough to admit our corporate failings and work on those as well. Our little disciplines lead to the Lenten discipline that God really desires – which is to meet concretely the needs of “the afflicted.” We can and should use this period of Lent to make ourselves better, but it’s also prudent and desirable to consider that the best thing we might do to help ourselves is to help others first. The worship that God desires is rooted in social justice – loosening the bonds that society puts on others, letting the oppressed go free, breaking down barriers that keep us divided between “us” and “them”, sharing what we have with the hungry and homeless, with the stranger and dispossessed. This is even more important this year than it’s been in the past. And we find, when we do these things, that not only is God pleased with us, but also that our lives are filled in much the same measure that we fill others with God’s love and God’s mercy in real and concrete ways. We build ourselves when we build the kingdom of Heaven, and vice versa. We find it’s easier to let our lights shine when we have tended to the needs of others and not just ourselves.

This is not to say that we shouldn’t reflect on where we personally need to improve. Psalm 51 tells us in no uncertain terms that we need to acknowledge our sinfulness and our need for God’s mercy. And we need to remember that deliverance from our sinfulness is not going to come from anything we do – it comes from God alone. So we use this season of Lent to remember how much we need God and God’s mercy. We are called to acknowledge honestly where we are, what we have done well and what we have done less well, and recommit ourselves to living the lives God would have us live. We are also called, as Psalm 103

reminds us, to bless God for God's compassion, and to be grateful that God is not a God of inflexible justice, but of mercy and forgiveness.

And our Gospel reminds us of some of the dangers inherent in Lent. Here is one: we can be tempted to let Lent stand on its own, to be a six-week period set apart from everything we do, and then we go back to business as usual. This is not what Lent is about. Rather, Lent is a time when we firm up the foundation of our lives in Christ, when we get ourselves re-used to the discipline that this life requires. We know that we will stumble and fall in our faith; well, here's a time to deliberately do our best in order that we might go a little longer before the next time we fall, with God's help.

All that we do as the people of God is in some measure a recollection of what God has done for us. As the people of God, we must remember what God has done for us and continues to do for us today. And as Christians, remembering takes us inevitably to the cross. We are marked "as Christ's own forever" at baptism with oil in the sign of the cross. In our prayers we cross ourselves in the name of the Trinity. And we are reminded at each Eucharist that we receive the elements "in remembrance that Christ died for us." That death on the cross, as well as the resurrection, is central to our lives as Christians, and sometimes we rush to the one without living into the other.

That's one reason why most years we impose ashes in the shape of a cross on our foreheads. Obviously we can't do that this year. Father Michael and I will sprinkle ash on each other instead, and we invite you to do the same, whether you are by yourself or whether you are part of a family unit. Not being able to be with each other, to touch each other and to feel the grit of ash under our fingers, is one of the crosses we have to bear. But we remember that our daily crosses conform us to the image of Christ, the Word Made Flesh, through whom all things were made. We come from the Father, the Creator of the dust of which we are formed, and from the Spirit that God gave to Adam and Eve and to each of us. And through Christ we return to the Father, giving back our mortal and fallen nature sanctified and renewed in the death of him "who knew no sin." In our living and dying in Christ, we ourselves "become the righteousness of God."

The paradox of today is this: in the ashes of our lives, we receive eternal life. In the cross, the order of the universe is transformed, and love triumphs over evil and death. In our Lenten sacrifices, in our prayer, fasting, and charity toward others, we find "the peace of God, which passes all understanding," and an assurance that it is in giving that we receive, and in pardoning that we are pardoned. This year, in the

midst of all we have lost, in the midst of the pandemic that has cost almost half a million lives, it is harder perhaps to see the triumph at hand... and perhaps we feel that our self-denial of our in-person services, our fasting from both being in our physical spaces and from receiving the Eucharist, is all to no effect. Yet we must believe that our little actions make a difference, and that it is Love that keeps us going and Love that will bring us together again, Love that will make our reuniting in person into a true Easter, no matter what day it happens.

So for today: remember that you are dust – and rejoice. For God is with us – in the beginning, at the end, and even now as we live in between. Remember, repent, return to the Lord in joyful obedience. Use this Lenten season as a time to hear God's call and respond, so that on Easter Sunday we can all meet at the empty tomb and rejoice in our resurrection. And perhaps we can take that joy in resurrection out into the world and build a world that holds resurrection for all.

Amen.