

St Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake
Ash Wednesday, year 'C'
2 March 2022
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For the last few years on Ash Wednesday we've been seeing one of those liturgical trends which purport to be a means of evangelizing the un-churched but which are, in all honesty, embarrassing attempts at that most overused word: relevance. Yes, I'm talking about "Ashes to Go." If you've never heard of it, the name says it all: Clergy roam the streets offering, well, ashes to go. People can go up to the priest on the corner, get their foreheads smeared with an ash cross and be told "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

There are at least two problems with this approach. The first is that it lets people off the hook, as it were. The whole thing lacks an understanding not only of the spiritual discipline embodied by the Ash Wednesday liturgy—namely the hassle of dragging ourselves down here after a long day at work only to be put through the penitential ringer. This service is both inconvenient and uncomfortable. And that, of course, is the point.

The second problem is that "remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return," is no gospel message of hope. To be told those words on some random street corner and then go away is to be left in a really negative and dark place. That's it? That's what the Church has to say?—that we're dust and to dust we shall return?

But in the context of this liturgy we discover that's not necessarily a negative statement. For as the psalmist says, *"For he himself knows whereof we are made; he remembers that we are but dust."* That verse is so liberating: God knows. There is no shame in being weak, and weakness is not sin and should not conjure up feelings of guilt. One of the strangest developments of Christianity is that it cultivated a kind of introspective conscience which somehow proposed that we give honour to God by describing ourselves as utterly depraved.

Tonight helps us to remember that God knows our frame and that we are dust. God is not unreasonable. We're fragile, yet so beautiful. Isn't that our human condition? So fragile, yet so beautiful; so dignified by God and yet so vulnerable; so strengthened by God's love and yet still so weak.

Tonight we speak of being forgiven for the wrongs we've done, but I wonder if we need to re-frame that notion. What we need to be forgiven of, I think, is our propensity to deny our weakness, believing that we are strong enough to cope with life's demands on our own. This way of thinking, of course, leads to defensiveness and rationalization. Yet how many people are stuck in blind alleys because they are afraid of looking "weak", and how many insist they've never been wrong, have never made

poor choices, and that everything is someone else's fault? How many people have a negative image of God, an image of the stern and judgemental father, who spend their whole lives running away from him and trying to hide? How many people have an image of God that gives them very little dignity?

So tonight, when we take time to remember that we are but dust and give ourselves space to acknowledge our weaknesses that have caused us to fall—to sin—should not be thought of as an exercise in religious masochism. Because it isn't. It's really a time for healing and restoration and, strange thought it may sound, even liberation. Saying to ourselves and to God that we've blown it, that we've been selfish and greedy and negligent and wasteful, that we've been, in short, weak both in body and spirit, is liberating.

It's liberating because it's difficult to live whilst carrying around the heavy baggage of failure and failing. We yearn to set these heavy loads down and to leave them behind. This evening allows us to hear again that we don't need to carry them around, nor are they what ultimately defines us. Ash Wednesday's message, which ultimately is a positive and healing one, liberates us from the debilitating message we've told ourselves for long, namely that we should be strong enough to cope with life. Because the truth is, we're weak and frail and afraid—and God knows that. And therefore there's no shame in admitting it.

There are those who think the cross of ash is a sign of depravity, but it's not. To wear it is to be reminded that to repent isn't to come grovelling before God begging forgiveness. Rather, it's to be reminded that we can come with confidence—and dignity—before God, acknowledging our dusty fragility, and thereby be given the divine strength to look even death in the face and not lose heart.