

## Ash Wednesday

What does ashes have to do with grace?

As the ash is smudged on our foreheads, or this year, perhaps sprinkled on our foreheads, the minister reminds us what we are made of, that we are dust, not fairy dust or pixie dust, but dirt, ashes and that to dust we shall return. We are earthen creatures, frail, vulnerable, mortal and dirty, muddy. We can transcend our limitations, for a time, but we are forever falling back into our earthy nature. Adam is the word for earth in Hebrew. Adam, the earthen creature, the mud shaped by God's hands and into which God breathed his Spirit. Humility comes from the Latin word for earth. Humus. Human has a different origin but has the same resonance in our culture. To be human is to err, to stray and to know that we are erring, straying. To know that we can be better than we are and yet somehow, for some reason, as we here gather during this Novena we aren't better. And so we earthen creatures humble ourselves today, humble ourselves to remind ourselves of who we are.

We wish we were much more. We wish we were more like a precious jewel, pure, brilliant, unbreakable, perfect. But we are more like a clod of dirt, crumbly, messy, commonplace. On the other hand, it's these very qualities that can also make of us a fertile field. Before you can plant a seed you have to be able to till the ground. You have to break it up, and turn it over, you have to expose its unseemly underside to the rains and the open air. A pot of jewels is dazzling, its worth a fortune, but it makes for poor potting soil. The earth must compost the death and rot of life gone by, if it is ever to bear new life.

So too, fertile soil must be porous. And so too, a fertile soul is a porous soul, and a porous soul is a poor soul, a humble soul, empty enough to receive God's word, thirsty enough to drink in God's grace. The very strength and purity of a jewel ensures its sterility. A diamond may last forever, but it cannot sustain life, it cannot cooperate in God's creative power. God's grace, like the rains, falls on the just and the unjust, the humble and the proud alike. But God's grace runs off the proud like water runs off a ruby. Those who think themselves great cannot take in God's grace—they do not recognize any need for it.

For the mystics, humility is the mother of all the virtues. Love is the pinnacle, but humility is the ground; the dirt from which the virtues sprout, take root and grow to full bloom. In doing so the mystics follow Jesus, who begins his list of beatitudes in Matthew with the poor in spirit, and who identifies himself at the center of the Gospel as meek and humble of heart.

Ash is also a sign of grief, life turning to ashes. In traditional cultures people would pour ashes over their heads as a gesture of grief. Today more and more people are being cremated at death. My father is now ash, as is my brother and one of my sisters. But whether we burn the bodies of our beloved to ash or we bury their bodies into the ground, we return their bodies to the earth from which they came. And while dead, it is our faith that life is not done with them yet, any more than life is done with the dirt and ash to which their bodies have returned. Even ash can generate new life. Just across the border in Idaho, farmers used to turn their grasslands to ashes every fall that new seeds might germinate. We have learned that even a forest reduced to ash is not the evil we have long taken it for. It may be a threat to our homes, but we have come to recognize that fire and ash is part of the life cycle of a forest.

Ash too is a sign of penitence. Its humbling confessing our sins. Humiliating really, that we are not all we aspire to be. I know I am not perfect, but who needs to recall chapter and verse? I know I am not perfect, but I would like to think I am at least whole. But no. I am divided against myself as well as my neighbor. Lust, self-indulgence, envy, greed, jealousy, rage, sloth, despair, vanity, pride. We are embarrassingly familiar with the gamut of the capital sins. We know them from the inside, as perpetrators as well as victims.

Yet the other side of humility is openness. We sin in part because we can be hurt, we are vulnerable because we are open, we are needy because we draw our strength from those around us. We need the earth, we need one another, we need God=s grace, not to be perfect, we will never be all we aspire to be, but at least to be more whole, more true to ourselves, more caring for one another. A twentieth century mystic Simone Weil compares someone seeking perfection through their own effort to hopping. We can jump up and seemingly rise above the earth, but only for a moment. We are earthen creatures. Our feet belong on the ground. We must call upon God=s grace to sweep us off our feet, and into eternity.

Our task is to open a space in our souls for God to enter. Our task is to cut away the brush, clear away the clutter, sweep away the distractions, unencumber ourselves, that we might rise from death to new life, that God himself in the person of Christ, might come to birth once more in our heart.

Traditionally these ashes are from the palms of Passion Sunday at the close of Lent last year. From last Lent to this, we pick up where we left off. For repentance is not a once and for all kind of thing. We are creatures of habit, we fall back into the same ruts over and over again. Our

task is not to lose faith either in ourselves or one another or God.. We need to practice, over and over again, turning over of our lives to Christ. Its not a one off but the practice of a lifetime. Today as we mark ourselves with ash, let us begin again.