

Ash Wednesday
2014

I think it is somewhat hard to be a Christian on Ash Wednesday. And no, I don't just mean that we had to get up at the crack of dawn to be here this early, or because it is a miserable rainy day...

I think it is difficult because, especially on Ash Wednesday, we Christians know and understand fully the paradox in which we live: We are created in God's image and are called to be saints. And yet we fail miserably and fall so far short of what we are called to be. St. Paul speaks for every one of us when he says, *The good I would do is the good I fail to do, and the sin I wish to avoid is the one to which I return time and again. Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?*

Those who live in the extremes of optimism and pessimism have nothing of this struggle. For the cheery optimist, for whom there is no problem that a self-help guru, a book of advice, a kale smoothy or a yoga mat will not solve, there is no paradox. But people are only able to live in that "happy" place if they live in a world of rather profound denial... closing their eyes and stopping up their ears in order to be protected from much of the world's pain. And of course, since for many of these souls, "God" is not much in the picture, they tend to grade themselves on a rather generous curve... awarding themselves an A+ for a C- kind of life.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the pessimists, the nihilists, those who see the world as cruel, empty and meaningless.

Some of these are victims of addiction. The recent tragic news of Philip Seymour Hoffman comes to mind: An incredible talent, beautiful children, so much to live for... and yet he is found dead on the cold bathroom floor with a needle still in his arm. We know that addiction is a disease, and we have empathy and sympathy... but even so, there must be a tipping point... a moment when the darkness wins, and no matter how "good" the good, how bright the talent, how blessed the possibilities, the choice is made...and the *preference* for an escape to nothing is the tragic result.

And there are others, some with the pathologies of mental illness, and others who are evil simply because they **choose** evil, and through the repetitions and desensitizing rhythms of bad choices, the individuals become what they have chosen. And this kind of downward spiral is even more insidious than that of the self-destructive addict... for those who despair of *all* hope are just as inclined to destroy others as themselves. *Let not the needy O Lord be forgotten. Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.*

The good news is that on this Ash Wednesday, Our Lord has a word to speak to all of these circumstances. To the hopelessly optimistic, he offers a few words of reality. Truthfully, if I were the Messiah, this might be a part of the job I would enjoy. *Sit down for a moment my dear... let me tell you a few hard truths about your life. Have you looked in a mirror lately? You are so dust!* (I think it is clear why I have not been given this job!)

To the nihilist, the addict, the self destructive and all those for whom the darkness and emptiness of the grave are preferable to life and life *abundantly*, the Lord also comes. To the amazement of many, I am sure, they meet a God they did not even think they believed in. A God they were *certain* did not exist. But in truth, he is a God who took the whole weight of bleakest, darkest night upon himself. In their despair, they jumped headlong into nothing, but instead fell into the arms of love.

And to you and me, those who are here this morning because we seek to be saints, but who know every day that we fall so far short... he comes. He meets **as** we are, and **where** we are.. and he *loves* us. And he assures us that he has won the victory, and that he will complete in us the sanctification begun at our baptisms: *Finish then thy new creation, pure and spotless, let us be.*

And interestingly enough, what he says to each group, is the same... but it is received according to the need of each: *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

And we reply: *But thou are the God whose property it is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore gracious God, so to each the flesh of thy Dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink His Blood... that he may evermore dwell in us... and we in Him.*

+++Amen