

Ash Wednesday

February 25, 2009

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalms 103 or 103:8-14

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Each year churches receive a free liturgical calendar from The Church Pension Fund. The top of the calendar is always a cartoon, usually very pointed and accurate about the life of the church. This month, February, the cartoon is of a priest imposing ashes on a parishioner kneeling at the rail; the priest is saying, "Remember you are dust, but a very high quality sort of dust." The caption says it's for those who feel that Lent is a "downer."

We are dust, you and I. The second story of The Creation in the Book of Genesis tells us that God reached down and scooped up a handful of dust, earth, and shaped and molded us; we are one with the earth itself, made of the same stuff. The name of our mutual ancestor is "Adam"; in Hebrew it means "earth."

But we are not just earth or dust; we are not inert and lifeless. The God who shaped us and molded us breathed life into us, into His creation, and we became complete, we became living beings formed in the image of God, a mortal body of clay inspired, in the best sense of the word, by the creative breath of God.

We are God's children. You and I were proclaimed to be God's children at our baptism. We were baptized in water; we were sealed by the Holy Spirit; the sign of the cross was made on our foreheads in holy oil, the sign of our identity.

The mark of the oil faded quickly, but the sign of the cross remained, indelible. We trace that sign again in Holy Unction when you are sick; we trace it again when you die.

On this day we trace that sign, not in Holy Oil, but in ashes. The ashes are made from the palm branches that we waved last Palm Sunday as we proclaimed the coming of the Messiah. The ashes this day tell the world that we are Christians; more importantly, they remind us of our identity and what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. We bear that sign proudly but not pridefully: there is a difference.

We proclaim our identity in profound humility, penitent, that we know we have not always lived up to our identity this past year, that we have not been what God wants us to be, that we separated ourselves from God. With this reminder we begin the forty days of Lent, days of reflection, meditation, and self-examination. Lent is the season in which you and I commit ourselves to amendment of our lives. That's not a downer: that's a gift from God.

And it's true: we are a high quality sort of dust.

In His Holy Name.