



Ash Wednesday, Year C – February 17, 2010

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Tara Livingston

You are dust and to dust you shall return.

As a child I met Ash Wednesday with a sense of wonder and fear. There was something quite magical, if you will, about entering a sombre gathering, remaining serious and not fidgeting and getting that mystical smudge on my forehead. The fear came when I had to re-enter my public school and explain to each of my classmates in turn why my face was dirty. There was at least one traumatic year when one of my teachers – who had a similar smudge I might add – had me tell the whole class about its significance. I remember little of what I said and surely my Priest would have been horrified by my simplistic explanation.

You are dust and to dust you shall return.

Today is the beginning of a journey with Jesus one that lead him through temptation, through examination, through inevitable movement toward Jerusalem, through betrayal and ultimately to the cross. It is in the context of that journey that we take the opportunity to share some of his experiences in some small way so that we might understand or empathize with the sacrifice that he was so consciously making. It is a trek that will take us deeper into ourselves and into what makes us human.

It would be a mistake to think of the Lenten journey as a self improvement program. It is God calling us home, calling us back into deep relationship with our creator, our creation. You are dust and to dust you shall return. We are called to become self aware in a deep and meaningful way through self-examination, repentance, fasting, self-denial, meditation, prayer, reading and study of scripture. It is a form of radical discipleship that has the possibility of changing not only ourselves but our world as well. But it will not be easy in this 20th century world.

In a world where buying is synonymous with godliness, where consumption is encouraged for the sake of the economy, we are called to fasting and self denial.

In a world where, according the movie Love Story, love is never having to say you're sorry, we are called through self examination and repentance to say it every day over and over again.

In a world of sound bites and Twitter where image is everything we are called to study ancient texts, our foundation and by examining our past we might reshape what is to come.

And in a world where respirators and life support machines pretend to keep us alive forever, Ash Wednesday, more than anything else, reminds us that there is no denial of death.

This past Friday the world collectively held its breath before letting out a groan of horror. It was not just the folks at Whistler, the people in Vancouver or even just Canada who joined together to mourn the tragic loss of a young man who

was on his way to achieving his dream. A life tragically cut short before it had a chance to begin. In September of 2001 the world held its breath in horror and disbelief and the absolute devastation unfolding before them on their TV screens and cursed aloud at the unbelievable loss of life as the towers in New York crumbled and fell.

And the dust enveloped the city.

Just over a month ago images began appearing of lifeless legs sticking out from under collapsed buildings in Haiti and the world, Canada, Alberta, Calgary, together gasped in disbelief. As a colleague of mine mentioned to me just yesterday, we will, and do pick up and carry on with our day to day lives but we would be remiss if we did not allow such events to touch us; to change us. Even though our lives continue we become aware that we are one step closer to our own departure from this earth.

We all have personal stories of loss but there is something unique about these collective losses that illustrate our mortality and the finite amount of time we have been given here on this earth. No matter how much money the millionaires spend on cryogenics or miraculous pills we are not meant to stay here together on earth indefinitely. If we were then life wouldn't really be worth living. If we had not come from ashes, from nothing, through God, then death might be something to fear: but we know better.

The magnificence of God's love for us is somehow made manifest in our finite humanity.

1 O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.

2 You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.

3 You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.

4 Before a word is on my tongue
you know it completely, O LORD.

And it continues...

13 For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.

15 My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,

16 your eyes saw my unformed body.
All the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be. (Psalm 39)

Imagine if the world knew of that never ending, undeniable love that God has for each and every one of God's creation. Imagine if YOU knew of that never ending, undeniable love. Imagine how such knowledge, such deep understanding would change you – forever, and in turn, change the world.

The celebration of Mardi Gras, best carried out by our brothers and sister in New Orleans, includes the wearing of masks. Along with "using up what's in the cupboard" or, eating and drinking everything in sight, before the self denial of Lent begins, the mask has a deeper meaning. They are quite intentionally worn to maintain anonymity but even they are eventually stripped away.

So, what is your mask? What is it that you wear as a disguise? What might happen if that mask of certainty, or of stoicism, or of "Leave it to Beaveritis", or of innocence, or of anger, or of wealthiness, or of poverty, or of health, or of entitlement was stripped away during this time of self examination of Lent? We all have masks and from behind them we glimpse at the true world around us. God is calling you to take them off. God is calling you to remove those layers that hide your true self. God has searched you out and known you and is calling you to know yourself. God is calling you to come face to face with your mortality so that you might make a decision to fully live. God is calling you to fully embrace your life until your death. There is a Latin saying that goes "from the moment we are born we begin to die". How true. But in between the moment of our birth and our inevitable death we are called to live; to fully live our lives. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust with an emphasis on the "to".

So on Ash Wednesday we begin to journey into ourselves. Be real. Examine your hearts. Repent for your sins; those things that take you away from the love of God, and that separate you from one another. As a form of discipline try denying yourself something that, while it feels necessary is really just frivolous. Meditate, perhaps using Psalm 39, the one from which I quoted. Come and study with us and enter deeper into understanding. And pray. And pray. And pray. You will be amazed and what God reveals to you as you remove your mask. God created you and saw that it was good. God loves you. Full stop.