

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tonight, we gather to prayerfully begin our Lenten journey. This somber worship tonight is in a sense a prayer that reminds us that we are mortal and in need of reconciliation with God. This worship is also the start of a period of time for giving, fasting and prayer until sundown on Holy Thursday. The next five weeks of worship will commemorate the forty days Jesus spent fasting and being tempted by Satan in the desert before beginning his public ministry. But as we return to a deep sense of God in our lives over the next forty days of Lent, may we also remember that this sense of need is not limited to the forty days of Lent, our need of God and God's grace runs throughout our days until we return to the dust...until we return to the dust.

I opened by saying that this worship service begins our prayerful journey through these forty days of Lent...and as we go through these forty days, we hear words such as, prayerful and solemn, and we impose ashes on our foreheads tonight to remind us that we are dust and we return to the dust from which we came. The solemnity of Lent is obvious tonight in so many ways...we don't sing "Joy to the World" as our closing hymn tonight. Rather we will sing...Forgive me, Lord, for thy dear Son, the ill that I this day have done. This reflective solemnity during Lent will be noticeable in our worship and in our appointed lessons as well. Just look around you right now...there are always less people tonight for Ash Wednesday than there are for Christmas Eve or Easter morning. Tonight, we don't hear of the blessed birth of Jesus Christ, nor do we hear of the rebirth of Jesus Christ from the tomb. Tonight, we hear the cold hard truth that we are dust and to dust we all return.

At the very start of Holy Scriptures we are told that:

the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. (Gen 2:7)

Lest we forget, this passage from Genesis reminds us that the next breath we take is a pure gift. And shortly after we are formed by God, we all fall from God's grace and hide from God. But it is God who comes looking for us, *we do not return to God on our own*, God searches us out and finds us hidden in our shame. It is God who then reminds us that:

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.' (Gen 3:19)

Perhaps this is why there are NOT so many folks here tonight, because the imposition of ashes is an imposing unpleasant truth that reminds us that we are not the illustrious folks we think we are. We spend a great deal of time, money, and effort avoiding the fact that we are dust. We are fallen, and we can't get up on our own. T. S. Eliot makes the assertion that suggests that this is perhaps why folks don't love the church. Eliot says it this way:

"Why should men love the Church? Why should they love her laws? She tells them of Life and Death, and of all that they would forget. She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to be soft. She tells them of evil and sin, and other unpleasant facts. They constantly try to escape from the darkness outside and within by dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good. But the man that is will shadow the man that pretends to be."¹

¹ Eliot, T. S. *The Complete Poems and Plays*. Faber and Faber: London England, 2004.

What I hear Eliot saying here is that when we are face to face with the cold hard truth such as grace and forgiveness for *all* who face sin and death, we don't always agree...we feel some are more deserving than others and we, like sheep without shepherds follow our own gods...while we put Christ behind the gods or the messiahs of our choosing...the gods or messiahs of our opinions or the gods who tell us all we want to hear. We in turn, then use our piety to step on those who don't follow or agree with our god. But this is exactly what Jesus is warning us about tonight when he warns us about being pompous about our piety.

Our piety is our inner experience of God expressing itself through our *sincere-unthinking* behavior and reverence. Our piety is the personal physical manifestation of our faith. Our piety begins first and foremost with the recognition of our sin and our need for God and God's grace given in Jesus Christ through our faith. In other words, a true understanding that we are dust, and to dust we shall return...but from that dust we have the promise of the resurrection we share with Jesus Christ. This ashen cross that will be placed on our foreheads is not a mark of our righteousness, our glory, or our piety, rather it is a mark showing the world that we are sinners who despite our sin and death receive grace from the very cross we have been marked with...it is a mark of our grief for our sin...it is a sign, a reminder for all who look upon it of *God's* reconciliation with us through this cross.

The imposition of this ashen cross tonight is also a reminder or a shadow of the cross we are marked with at our Baptism. Yes, we are dust, but at our Baptism we have been marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit. At our Baptism, we begin of our faith journey. At our Baptism, we receive a mark with oil in the shape of a cross and tonight we are reminded of the beginning of a different journey with the mark of ash in the form of a cross...a cross that signifies NOT death but reconciliation for our sin, a mark of life from the dust of our sin. This cross is a reminder to the world and to all who see it that the one wearing it is a sinner in need of the salvation and grace given by the one who *DIED ON IT*.

So tonight, as our journey through Lent begins, placed on our head is the mark of *who we truly are*...a sinner who is dust and by that sin we will return to the dust. The very cross of ash on our head is telling you, me, and all who see it that from that very dust placed on us we live with the hope and grace given on that very cross. This dust displayed for all to see is the sign of God's devotion to us, God's saving love for us, it is the sign of new life for us and for all who see it. For behold, this ashen cross displayed on our foreheads does not show *OUR* righteousness, *OUR* devotion and piety, rather it reveals, it signals, and it shows all who look upon it...God's righteous and devout love and faithfulness to us made know to all on the very cross placed on us. By the cross God has purged us of our sin and promised new life to us...

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