

God, Life, and Everything Ashes

Today is Ash Wednesday.

Each year, somewhere between February 5 and March 5 (depending on when Easter comes), Christians around the world gather to have ashes smudged on their foreheads.

The words accompanying this peculiar custom make it even more curious. The priest who applies the ashes says, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

What is that all about?

You probably know that Ash Wednesday begins the church season known as Lent. It is a 40 day period (not counting Sundays) of penitence and fasting in preparation for the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. During this season, we are to increase our prayer, take on a spiritual discipline (such as giving something up) and examine our lives for places where we stray from God.

But we start with ashes and those ominous words.

Why?

Because we are mortal. Because we will all die, that is for certain. Because we believe that we are on this earth for only a very short time, and that this time we have here prepares us for our lives after this. We remind ourselves most especially that we are not God, that we cannot see the whole picture - none of us.

Because of our limited view, not to mention our fear of death and weakness, we are prone to sin, that is, to becoming so self-centered as to forget or devalue our relationships with God and our neighbors.

So we remind ourselves that we aren't God, that we aren't even all that extraordinary, and that all that self-centeredness is kind of a waste of time and effort. We all end up in the same state anyway. Yes, dear reader, you are going to die.

And that is good news.

At least, it's good news for anyone who trusts that we will live eternally in some way that we can't yet comprehend. In a way, reminding ourselves that we will die also reminds us that we will all live - truly live - and that to live fully means to live beyond ourselves.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return, then, is an invitation to think about who you are and who you want to be. It is a healthy practice, remembering your mortality. And humbling. Seven billion people in the world, and you're just one of them. When you die, very few will even notice. Even if you're famous, you're just a blip.

On the other hand, that puts you on an equal footing with everyone else. Short, tall, rich, poor, righteous or scoundrel, all will face death eventually, and there's nothing anyone can do about it.

Oh, and I think this remembering is a good practice even for those who don't believe in God or an afterlife. Even if this is all there is, and there's no post-death accountability or reward (or anything), it's good to remember that you are temporary. Keeping that knowledge ever before you can help reduce fear of doing important things. Why hold back? You're going to die anyway. On the other hand, why not be kind, since we're all in the same boat?

As Christians, we use this opportunity to remember that we are bound to God, that we are created by God, and that we will return to God. In the meantime, we acknowledge our weakness, our sinfulness, and our limitedness because it's good to know who you are.

If you'd like to share this experience, you can attend an Ash Wednesday service at most churches in your area. At St. James', we offer three services at 6:30 AM, 10:00 AM, and 7:00 PM. And in case I wasn't clear, that's today. So check your watch and come on over. You'll be glad you did.