

Ash Wednesday

February 22, 2012

The first symbol: dust. The formula stems from Genesis. “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground. You are dust and to dust you will return.” What does dust say to us? I have to accept, experience, endure the dust I am. Like dust, I’m commonplace. I’m ordinary. I’m a speck in the universe. I’m one of uncounted billions who have blown about this planet. Each day I experience my dust. From the moment I struggled from my mother’s flesh, I’ve been in the process of dying. I’m a creature of pain. I’m a creature of sin. I’m so anxious, so perplexed: about myself, about people, about life.

Pretty grim, isn’t it? Only if you stop there. Only if you stop with the symbol that is dust. But that symbol is incomplete. When I dust your forehead, I dust it with another symbol: the sign of the cross. And that symbol declares that dust has been redeemed. Precisely here is the bone and marrow of our belief. When God’s Son became the dust we are and nailed it to a cross, God’s judgment “You are dust” was transformed. I don’t mean that you stop being dust. We can never expect to quite escape from that dust. The new is that Jesus Christ experienced every bit of that – for us. This speck of humanity is now “charged with the grandeur of God.” Our dust is electric with God’s life. Our nothingness is filled with God’s eternity. Our nothingness has Christ’s own shape.

With this new shape, the sentence “You are dust and to dust you will return” ought no longer terrify us. Of course we shall die. I, for one, don’t want to die. But the sign of the cross cries to us that death is not the end of our dust. You don’t wait for Easter to rise with Christ. Because of our baptism, we have already risen. We are incredibly alive. Focus on those twin symbols. Even when the dust disappears, “Remember that you are dust – dust redeemed by a cross.”

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