

Ash Wednesday

February 13, 2013

Lent is a seeming contradiction. One part of the paradox protrudes today. When the minister crosses your head with ashes, one of the formulas the Church recommends is: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." This body of ours is gonna crumble. And yet this coming Sunday, the Preface will open with: "Holy Father, your faithful people await this joyful season." This joyful season. Well, which is it to be? The paradox is real, but you do not solve it with an either/or. As with any good paradox, the solution is a both/and. Both sorrow and joy; tears and laughter. In a word, the paschal mystery: dying/rising, intertwined. Let's see how it works out by, addressing the twin symbols on our foreheads: dust and the sign of the cross.

The first symbol: dust. What does dust say to us? Dust is the image of the commonplace. There is always more than enough of it. What does it matter if it is this dust or that dust? It's all the same. It's the symbol of nothingness. It has no content, no form, no shape. It just blows away. This precisely is what God says to me: "You are dust." God doesn't say I'm only dust. But I have to accept, experience, endure the dust I am. Like dust, I'm commonplace. I'm ordinary. Each day I experience my dust. I'm a creature of pain. I'm a creature of sin. I'm perplexed about myself, about people, about life.

Pretty grim, isn't it? But 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 Jesus became the dust we are and nailed it to a cross, God's judgment "You are dust" was transformed. I don't mean that we cease to be dust. We will always be men and women of flesh and blood. The new thing, the redeeming feature, is that Jesus experienced every bit of that – for us. And so, ever since this speck of humanity that is me, is now "charged with the grandeur of God." We are sisters and brothers of Jesus-in-flesh. Our dust is electric with God's own life. 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, am not anxious to die – I love this life with a passion. But the sign of the cross cries to us that death is not the end of our dust. The cross is a sign. We don’t have to wait for Easter to rise with Christ. We have risen! From the moment of our baptism, we are incredibly alive with the life of Christ. Focus on these twin symbols. Wear these symbols with pride, with hope, with love. Remember that you are dust – dust redeemed by the cross.

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