

Ash Wednesday
March 9, 2011

I've written pretty extensively and preached quite a bit on today's Gospel for Ash Wednesday. In response, I generally use the formula "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel." Today, I want to share a reflection on Genesis 3:19. "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return."

That doleful phrase describes the content and context of our lives. Dust is our beginning and our end, our alpha and omega. Dust determines our possibilities in this world and embodies our potential for the next world. On this fateful day, we could do well to contemplate our basic material. I want to share another priest's powerful reflection on the cross of ashes. I don't know the priest. His name is Father James Smith.

He writes, "Dust is next to nothing, raw, crude, primary matter. It has no taste, no feel, no past, no future – it simply is. Dust is humble, earthy, with nowhere to go, no way to get there and nothing to do in between. Dust is anonymous, undistinguished, one of trillions of specks of gross material. Dust has no distinguishing characteristics, no uniqueness, no identity, no personality. Dust is all over the place, yet always out of place. It is ignored, disdained, swept up, pushed around, thrown away. Dust is the useless but necessary foundation for everything else.

But today you are also signed, sealed, marked, dusted with a cross. A cross is a sign of contradiction, both a curse and a blessing, an emblem of shame and glory, a symbol of defeat and triumph. Its vertical beam connects earth and heaven. Its horizontal beam embraces and enfolds the whole world.

And what does all this mean? What does it matter at all? It means that the Son of God became dust. And it matters because when his crucified dust was transmuted into the gold of glory, our own dust was injected with new possibilities. Our temporary mass was infused with eternal energy. To paraphrase Gerard Manley Hopkins, "We are what Christ is because he was what we are, and this joke, potsherd, matchwood that we are, will be immortal diamond."

But this miraculous transformation is not alchemy, that magic by which base metal is transmuted into gold. No, this is the slow, painful process by which our dust is pressed, squashed, filtered, squeezed, trampled, forcibly shaped through the disciplined desert of Lent.”

The cross of ashes is not a decoration, but a declaration of our determination to mimic the life of Christ, to mime his defenseless position on a cross. The cross of ashes is not merely a sign that we believe in the redemptive value of Christ’s death, but that we intend to participate in Christ’s death. The ashen cross is our profession of faith in the value of suffering, in the worth of perseverance, in the impotence of that imposter death and the invincibility of life everlasting.

Paul A. Magnano
Pastor