

Ash Wednesday

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Our lives are far more fragile than we ever care to admit.
And not just our lives but everything that supports are bodies and lives.
Our marriages, our health, our country, and our church can evaporate in a moment.
The forces of nature and the forces of evil men, the principalities of Hell, even the weaknesses of our own depravity, are a constantly looming over us.
We are sustained in this dying life solely by the constant, intervening mercy of God.
Without God’s merciful presence you’d immediately return to ashes and dust.
And this dust, in and of itself it is lifeless, formless and powerless powder.
It is nothing and can do nothing.
But our very fallen perversity militates against believing this!
Our entire live become an elaborate attempt to defy the gravity of death.
Some obsess with exercise and medicine thinking to prolong their lives.
Others cultivate the intellect, or will or feelings.
We look for ways to do it on our own—to declare independence from God.
We seek to assert that there is, in fact, life in us and not only dust and ashes.
After all, we look around and see that we are full of life and fun and vitality.
We have such power to create, work, solve problems, invent.
We can build buildings over a quarter of a mile tall.
We have the world’s most powerful government spending \$3 trillion a year.
We can build a machine to fly to Pluto or land a man on the moon.
How could we do all of this if we are only dust? But then reality breaks in.
Our best buildings can be leveled in an hour by fanatics with razor blades.
Our smartest computers can be destroyed by a few lines of code.
The greatest empires in the world can be brought down by vandals.
Careers can be wiped out by a whisper.
Your life, snuffed out by a patch of black ice or a drunk behind the wheel.
Your faith can be destroyed by a single presumptive sin.
In a heartbeat we are reminded that all of our accomplishments, accolades and achievements are vapor.
In such moments we are brought back to know that all of life, all strength, all power is not found in dust and ashes but in the Spirit of God who animates us.
Apart from God, you are nothing. Destined for the dust bin and the ash heap.
And so tonight ashes are smeared in the shape of a cross.
The cross indicates death—death brought by sin.
Sin by which your try to declare independence from your only source of life.
For, dust and ashes that we are, death is not some foreign intrusion into our essentially living selves. It is rather our natural state apart from the Living God.
And so, **“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”**
This is a call to reflect soberly on who you really are as a creature of God.
To think realistically about the contingency of your life.
Such morbidity and morose discussion sends many fleeing into denial and escape.
Entire churches and theologies are invented and reinvented for the sole purpose of offering a way to escape this truth and make us feel more alive and useful.
But it is no use. When all is said and done we are still powerless in the face of death.

But there is another way—another solution.
It is the Jerusalem way—the Jesus solution.
On this path we do not run from death but walk toward it.
Following Jesus we do not avoid death but embrace it.
Let me explain. Because something astounding has happened in Christ,
The living God Himself has assumed your dust and ashes.
He has not only animated it for a time with His Spirit.
But He has become dust and ashes for all time.
He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.
God joined Himself to your dust.

And this changes everything.

In Christ, the relationship between ashes and life is not fragile and contingent.
But in Christ it is permanent and inseparable.
Since Christ is Himself the living God, you can no longer think of dust as essentially lifeless and animated from without.
Rather, in Christ’s body of dust and ashes, is found life itself.
And so everything that Christ is and does in dust and ashes is your life.
And what does He do? He goes to Jerusalem and to the death that awaits Him there.
Unlike us, He is essentially unable to separate Himself from God and therefore, unable to die... Nevertheless, He chose to die for us.
We who, by the perverseness of our hearts, constantly seek independence from our very God and source of life...
We are rescued by One who cannot separate from Himself but dies nonetheless.
Jesus takes up the cross and by taking it up, makes it an instrument of life.
And so, tonight, that ashen cross on your forehead is not only a sign of death.
Now it is a sign of life.
Ashes and dust that should never have known death, fell lifeless on that fateful day.
His lifeless Body was laid into the tomb.
But it did not decay! It was not corrupted.
It did not decay because death had done its worse already.
He lived this dying life and allowed death to have its way with Him.
Then it was done and there was no more. It could do no more.
Death was dead, empty. It lost sting and victory.
Thus did He take up that dust out of the tomb again.
His soul was reunited to the Body and raised again to Life.
Dust of your dust, and ashes of your ashes, He lives perfect and whole, God and Man in one, that you would not taste death but live forever in His Father’s house.
Your own dustiness, your mortality, was changed that day.
And not only your dust and ashes but all dust and ash that Christ Jesus takes into Himself now becomes life itself.
So Christ has given His life also into other dust and ashes that give you life.
Bread and wine which decay to dust and ashes must also now serve an eternal purpose.
Water which turns to vapor and blows away, has now become a life-giving thing.
Just as Christ’s body of ashes itself now gives you life.
So see the cross of ashes and know that the ashes are no longer yours but Christ’s.
The cross is no longer your death but is now Christ’s life.
So when you “Remember, O Man, that you are dust.”.. Remember that Jesus has become dust and ashes as well, and so gives eternal life to your own. AMEN.