

Homily for Ash Wednesday, 2021

Genesis 3:19

'Dust to dust'

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TEXT – Genesis 3:19

“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; **you are dust, and to dust you shall return.**”

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PRAYER

Father, sanctify us in the truth, your word is truth, Amen.

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INTRODUCTION

Since I was a child,
I have been attending Ash Wednesday services.

And the custom of marking our foreheads with ashes in the shape of a cross,
Is one that Lutheran churches have observed my whole lifetime.

From an fairly early age the words that are spoken to accompany the marking with ashes,
struck me as quite powerful and profound, even if I didn't know why:

'Joshua, remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return'.

As a pastor now these words continue to strike me even more,
Because over and over again I have spoken them looking over an open grave as part of the
Church's funeral rite:

*'Since almighty God our heavenly Father, in his gracious wisdom has called our brother or
sister from this life, we commit his or her body to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes,
dust to dust. Dust we are and to dust we shall return.'*

Why are these words so powerful?

And how can they lead into the Lenten season as a time of spiritual renewal?

How can they lead us to Christ?

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SIGN OF MORTALITY

At the most basic level,
These words speak of death.

Adam was formed from the dust,
Now he's told he'll return to the dust.

And there's something about the image of dust that brings to mind,
Frailty, weakness,
transience.

These words remind us of our own mortality,

That we all will one day die.

In our time life-expectancy has steadily increased,
But the death rate itself has remained constant.

And it always will until Christ returns.

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Throughout history people of many different cultures and religions have seen that,
To be aware of this,
to acknowledge one's own death.

Is actually an essential part of living wisely and well,

The book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament picks up this ancient wisdom when it says:
Echoing our text,

²⁰All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. ²¹Who knows whether the human spirit goes upwards and the spirit of animals goes downwards to the earth? ²²So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?' Ecclesiastes 3:20-22

In other words,
An awareness of one's own mortality can bring life into a different perspective,
where you make the most of each day.

Greek Philosophers had versions of this thinking.

There's a famous Latin phrase: 'Memento Mori',
'remember your death'.

Legend has it that some Roman Emperors returning from battle would be followed by a servant whose task it was to repeat this phrase:
'Memento Mori'.

Remember that you are not immortal,
Remember your death.

So on Ash Wednesday we are confronted again with our own mortality,
Our death.

*'Remember that you are dust,
And to dust you shall return'*.

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SIGN OF REPENTANCE

But for the Christian,
dust and ashes are more than only a sign **that** we die.
We need to go deeper than this.

in the Bible dust and ashes are also a sign of **why** we die.

Because remember the context of those words in Genesis.

They are the final words of the Lord about the **consequences** of Adam and Eve's disobedience.

Do you remember?

First the Lord speaks to the serpent,
About going on his belly,
Eating dust,
And having the seed of the woman bruise his head.

Then to the woman,
About pain in childbearing,

Then to the man,
About toiling on the cursed ground with thorns and thistles,

Then comes the very last phrase as a culmination of all this:

'for you are dust, and to dust you shall return'.

Now in the context,
these words are devastating.

Because back in the creation account of Genesis chapter 2 we had heard:

*'Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground,
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life;
and the man became a living being.'* Gen 2:7

In God's good creation humanity was not meant to return to the dust.

We were created to live with God,

Not to die,

That's a result of our sin.

Thus,
dust and ashes become in the Bible also a sign of repentance,

Of an acknowledge of one's own unworthiness to stand before God on our own.

And so Abraham as he pleads for Sodom and Gomorrah says to the Lord,
'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.' Gen 18:27

As you hear these words spoken to us,

And receive the mark of ashes on your head,

You acknowledge that *'the wages of sin is death'*. Rom 6:23

The wages of **your** sin is death.

'We all like sheep have gone astray...'

You have gone astray.

'There is no one righteous, not even one...'

Not even you.

So as we enter another Lenten season,

you are called to *repent*,

*'For dust you are,
And to dust you shall return.'*

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SIGN OF SALVATION

But then we need to go deeper still.

Because Christians do not,
on Ash Wednesday,

remember death for its own sake,

or dwell on our sins to punish ourselves.

We do not cover ourselves with dust and ashes in hopeless despair,

No we are very deliberately marked with ash in the sign of the cross,

Because dust though we are,
we trust in our Lord Jesus Christ who brings the new creation from the dust of death.
Listen to how the Psalmist speaks of dust,

'For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.

¹³ As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. ¹⁴ For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.'

This steadfast love,
This compassion,
This removal of transgressions,

All leads to the cross of Christ,

Where *'he who knew no sin, became sin for us,
So that in him,*

We might become the righteousness of God'. 2 Cor 5:21

On the cross your Lord Jesus enters into the curse of death,
And he rises victorious to break that curse and defeat death forever.

So that the we can look into the dust of death,
We can look into the open grave,

Knowing that although we return to dust,
That is not the last word,
The last word is resurrection.

Here's what St Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15,
'The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. ⁴⁹Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.' 1 Cor 15:47-49

And yes you are in that man of heaven,

You who are baptised into Christ!

That's where you were first marked with the sign of the cross.

Which means you've **already** died.

'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.' Rom 6:3-4

It's been said that in the Christian tradition,
When people practiced the ancient art of '*Memento Mori*',
'Remember your death'

It took on new meaning.

Yes remember your death in the future,
But even more remember the death you've already died in your baptism,
Which united you to the death and resurrection of Christ.

When I quoted from the funeral rite earlier,
The quote was incomplete.

Here's how the committal goes on at a Christian funeral:

'...Dust we are and to dust we shall return.

But we know that as Christ was the first to rise from the dead, he will raise up our mortal bodies to be like his in glory.

We commend our brother or sister to the Lord, trusting in his infinite mercy.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.'

And if the Lord can bring new life from the dust and ashes of the grave,

He can certainly breathe new life into you right now by his Holy Spirit,

He can bring new life from the dust and ashes of whatever it is in your life right now that feels dead.

'If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation'. 2 Cor

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CONCLUSION

'Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return'

This evening,

Receive the mark of the ashes on your forehead,

And hear the words again which echo down from the garden of Eden.

Remember your mortality,

Remember your sinfulness and need to repent,

But never forget,

that the ashes on you are in the sign of the cross,

and that we receive eternal life by God's gift alone,
through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

God grant it to us for Jesus' sake, Amen.