



Parish of St. Peter's Anglican Church,

Hackett's Cove, Nova Scotia

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Ash Wednesday Sermon

Christ. Died. for Our. Sins.

I

There are four main points the cross and there are four main words in this sentence: **Christ. Died. for Our. Sins.** The sign of the cross I made on your foreheads tonight is sign that you are willing to repent, pick up Christ's cross, cleanse your hearts and walk with him towards Jerusalem. We have started our five-week Lenten journey - the 40-day period of prayer, and preparation for Easter.

This is very dark and solemn service, yet but by going into the darkness we can come into the light.

Bob Dylan wrote in his song "Not Dark Yet"

"I've been down on the bottom of a world full of lies

I ain't looking for nothing in anyone's eyes

Sometimes my burden seems more than I can bear

It's not dark yet, but it's getting there"

It can feel very dark when we are honest with ourselves and look deep into our souls. It is easy for us to lose our way - to lose track of our sins and trespasses, and live in a state of self denial. Confessing our sins, as we do before Holy Communion, keeps us accountable and in relationship with God. If we live in denial, we'll find ourselves feeling more and more distant. Keeping ourselves accountable with God can bring us closer to the light, and away from the darkness.

In our Joel reading tonight we heard:

Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.

God doesn't care about your garments; they are an earthy concern. I think he is telling us to "Stop window-shopping for the things of the world, the flesh and the devil."

We heard in our gospel reading from Matthew:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

We often hear “What are you giving up for Lent?” If you are giving up something that keeps you from “loving the Lord God with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself” then by all means give it up! And don’t go back to it on Easter Monday!

A real rending of our hearts must begin in the revelation of ourselves as we really are, achieved through examination of our conscience; a spiritual stocktaking, if you will. What God really wants is a clean heart.

II

So why do we come forward for the imposition of ashes?

To hear the words, “Remember... that dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,” while the ashes are placed on our foreheads, reminds us of our mortality and that we are dust. The dust recalls us to our creation, as the dust into which God breathed his life-giving spirit.

The ashes are made from burning last years’ palm crosses. These were the crosses that we waved as Christ came in on a donkey to Jerusalem. Fire ends in ashes. But these ashes mark a new beginning, a renewal in love.

Lent is the pilgrimage of love. That love is the perfecting grace of Christ, the divine love who became incarnate on earth. He lived and died

as one of us. He knows our imperfect loves and if we turn to him we can discover perfect love. He is our mediator and advocate:

Christ. Died. For Our. Sins.

There must be, in us, the continual purgation and purification of our loves. Lent is a time for us to pay particular attention to how we live our lives. We have many loves in our lives, but we need turn our hearts back to Christ and love him as much as much as he loves us. During Lent our hearts are purged and purified in the passion of Christ, in the pilgrimage of his perfect love for us.

That is the intent of Lent and the significance of beginning in ashes. The ashes are the ashes of our repentance, because of having turned away from God in sin. They turn us to redemption: saving or being saved from sin, error, or evil. We are called to repentance. This requires an awareness of our imperfect loves.

Tonight, we reviewed the Ten Commandments. Ask yourself – what is keeping you from the divine?

The ashes mark a beginning with a twofold purpose. There is conversion, which is the process of changing from our sinful ways, and there is contrition, which is the state of feeling remorseful and penitent for sin. Fire ends in ashes, but God's love is more powerful than the fire.

It can make something out of the ashes of our lives. We are to arise from the ashes in the renewal of faith, hope and love.

So what does repent mean? Repentance is the gracious stirring of his love in us, recalling us to the truth of ourselves as found in Christ. It means to turn around – to stop what we are doing and turn our hearts towards Christ. “Turn... with all your heart.” Have you ever been out driving and realize that you have taken a wrong turn? How long can it take to turn back and take the right one? It depends how far down the wrong one you have gone. When we confess, and consider our doings, we will know we have sinned when you get that feeling. Turn your car around and get on the right road. The road that that with every twist and turn will bring you towards the light of the world.

In St. James, we heard that God wants us “to decline from sin, and incline to virtue, that we may walk with a perfect heart before thee.” It isn’t easy, but that is why we are all here together “to bear one another’s burdens” when our own burden seems more that we can bear.

III

The poet John Donne wrote in his poem “Eclogue” celebrating love, that:

Fire ever doth aspire,

And makes all like itself, turns all to fire,

But ends in ashes”

This poem was actually a celebration of a marriage! As he suggests, love is **unlike** fire that ends in ashes. All love, in the Christian understanding of things, finds its ultimate meaning in the love of God. If we love God with all our hearts and minds, we will be one with him beyond the ashes.

The ashes of Ash Wednesday mark not an ending, but a new beginning, a renewal in love. Again, Lent is the pilgrimage of love. That pilgrimage involves renewal and perfecting of love. That love is the grace of Christ, the divine love incarnate, which goes the way of our imperfect loves to make perfect our loves.

Our loves must be purged and purified in the passion of Christ, in the pilgrimage of his perfect love for us. That is the intent of Lent and the significance of beginning in ashes. His perfect love should move in us. Our loves are to undergo this purgation and purification through what the hymn calls “*Love divine, all loves excelling.*” There is no greater love. After all, he gave us his only begotten son, and it was that son who died for our sins!

Let us repent and be thankful. Amen.

