

Ash Wednesday - Year B
February 25, 2009
The Reverend Robert P. Travis

“Ashes To Ashes, Dust To Dust”

Text: Joel 2:1-2,12-17, Psalm 103:8-14, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10, Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

I buried a man today. His widow, when we were looking at the burial service commented that she does not like the phrase, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Who does really? Who likes to be reminded of our insignificance in the face of the greatness of all creation. But the phrase remains there, it is not optional in our tradition.

Likewise Lent, though unpleasant in some ways is not optional, but a wonderful integral part of our tradition.

I heard the other day on the radio a story about Mardi Gras, and the person being interviewed commented that Mardi Gras has to end with Ash Wednesday and the party cannot be repeated until next year, because there would not be Mardi Gras without Lent.

I moved here from Orlando, which is home to many attractions that try to assert that there is no good time for penitence. There you can celebrate Mardi Gras, at Universal Theme Park, all the way until Easter. What an anti-climactic experience that would be!

While in some ways it disgusted me to live amongst such hedonism, I recognize that they would not be able to sell it if there weren't something attractive to all of us in that never-ending party. We like to think of ourselves so highly, and even those who do not believe in God have trouble accepting the thought that we might not continue after our life on this earth is over.

We are so full of pride, so self-centered. So why would we like to be reminded that we are but dust, and to dust we shall return. This year it seems that our penitence is enhanced by the sad state of our economy. It is not as hard to be introspective, and repentant, when times are tough. It seems natural, that we would wear ashes today, and examine our lives in the light of the end of everything. Rather than wallow in hopelessness, we are called to remember our hope in Christ Jesus. To put ourselves again in right relationship with Him. We might like to put it off, but the time has come. “Now is the acceptable time.”

“A minister of the Gospel determined on one occasion to preach on the text, “Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” While in his study thinking, he fell

asleep and dreamed that he was carried into hell and sat down in the midst of a conclave of lost spirits. They were assembled to devise means whereby they might get at the souls of men. One rose and said, "I will go to the earth and tell men that the Bible is all a fable, that it is not divinely appointed of God." No, that will not do. Another said, "Let me go: I will tell men that there is no God, no Saviour, no Heaven, no hell." "No, that will not do; we cannot make men believe that." Suddenly one arose and with a wise mien suggested, "No, I will journey to the world of men, and tell them that there is a God, that there is a Saviour, that there is a Heaven—yes, and a hell, too; but I'll tell them there is NO HURRY; tomorrow will do." And they sent him." 4

I tell that story to illustrate that this is your opportunity to begin to renew your relationship with God. The world around you wants to draw you away from this Holy Lent. The Devil wants you to sit here and observe this worship service, in vain.

Pride is the first sin. It continues to be the sin most Americans are enslaved by today. We put ourselves in the place of God, we think we are in control of our destiny. We think if we just work harder, our security will be assured. But this financial mess we are in shows that not to be the case. We have seen what results when we put our trust in money, markets and material things.

"Moth and rust consume, thieves break in and steal." Nowadays they steal through less obvious means, through creation of ponzi schemes, through manipulative lending that plays to our weaknesses and our pride. And we are reminded thereby not to put our trust in those things. We must rather put our trust in God who alone is eternal, merciful, and never failing.

Thomas a' Kempis put it this way:

"Gather for yourself the riches of immortality while you have time. Think of nothing but your salvation. Care only for the things of God. Make friends for yourself now by honoring the saints of God, by imitating their actions, so that when you depart this life they may receive you into everlasting dwellings.

Keep yourself as a stranger here on earth, a pilgrim whom its affairs do not concern at all. Keep your heart free and raise it up to God, for you have not here a lasting home. To Him direct your daily prayers, your sighs and tears, that your soul may merit after death to pass in happiness to the Lord."

Last night we celebrated a joyous Mardi Gras. But that party has ended. Tonight we remember that there is but one never-ending party. And we are all invited. But the host requires our preparation for the feast, and for that purpose we have this season of Lent.

Observe a Holy Lent, see what it does to your experience of Easter. If your end comes before April 12th this year, rejoice that your preparation was not in vain. Don't just sit

there and put off your right relationship with God another minute. “Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of Salvation!”