

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

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. As this practice of the imposition of ashes has grown each year we've been doing it, the repetition gets more striking. As I place ashes, that symbol of death, on the foreheads of these people I love – you, people who mean so much to me and my family, I am telling you that you will die and return to dust. Oh, and then the kids, my kids, looking them in the eye and telling them they will die. “Remember that you are dust” and I can't help but think of little Tyrah, that kindergartener they went to school with. Her brother went to preschool here – dust...returning to dust. Death. That's a powerful picture.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Christians all over the world are repeating that today – applying ashes and reminding each other that we are dust. All our readings echoed the refrain. Isaiah: ¹²“**For our offenses are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us. Our offenses are ever with us, and we acknowledge our iniquities.**” We aren't worth anything.

And then, verse 14: “**Justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter.**” ¹⁵“**Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice.**” Dust.

And the Psalm – we sang that refrain so many times – I hope it sunk in: “**Be merciful O Lord.**” Why? “**We have sinned.**” Dust. In the second lesson, Paul says he's happy he made those Corinthians sad, made them sorry, miserable for what they had done – Dust. And our Gospel Lesson discusses how so often we even do our “good deeds” sinfully – making them all about us... DUST. Worthless.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Why does he keep reminding us? Because we keep trying to deny it. **Remember that you are dust.** “But I am a good church-going Christian.” No, **Remember that you are dust.** “But, but I'm better than most.” No, **Remember that you are dust.** “But come on, no one can be perfect.” **Remember.**

You know where the verse comes from, right? That's what God said to Adam after he sinned. God had given Adam everything – formed him out of the dust and breathed into him the breath of life. Think about that. God's care, his own hands, forming him – in His image - for himself. But Adam rebelled. He didn't want the life God had given him but ran after death – after the wage of sin. Here is the dread reality of the cost and consequence of sin: “**If you eat of it, you will surely die,**” God had said. Sin begets death. It is death. It's been said, “*Sin is death in hiding, and death is sin made visible.*”

God had said to the serpent, **“You will crawl on your belly and eat dust all the days of your life,”** and then he tells Adam – “You, man, are dust” and humanity has been running from him who holds the power of death ever since, as he slithers along ready to consume us. And we just are not fast enough.

Adam knew this death, the death of his perfect trust in God, comfort with God, the death of his perfect relationship with his wife. He would hold death in his arms as his son died at the hand of his brother. Driven from the garden, he would no longer be able to eat from the tree of life and live forever.

And we are right there too, aren't we? We recall what sin has done to our lives, where the thorns and thistles bring sweat to our brows, where chaos and confusion reign in our world, where our bodies slowly die through sickness and disease, aging and pain. Sin has driven us from relationships and good habits, driven us to drink or to lie or to look for value or pleasure in the wrong places. Sin has driven us from loving, trusting connections – driven us from the tree of life in the middle of that Garden. Driven from the Garden, but like Adam, not driven to despair.

How do I know? Look at the very next verse of Genesis 3. Right after God told Adam, **“You are dust, and to dust you will return,”** Moses records what happened next. Verse 20: **“Adam named his wife Eve.”** Life. That's what her name means. Life. God had just told Adam – Remember death. And he names her “Life.”

Why? Because of what else God had promised. While Adam still would have to deal with death – God had promised the One who would crush that pursuing serpent – that dust eater. God had told Satan – **“He will crush your head and you will strike his heel.”** When Adam died, he would not be consumed by the dust eater, because God's promise destroyed Satan's power. Jesus destroyed Satan's power. That's why Isaiah's prophecy closed how it did: ²⁰ **“The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,” declares the LORD.** That's why it is so important to remember that you are dust. Repent – Jesus came to redeem you – to save you.

That's why Paul wrote in our 2nd lesson: **Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.** God just wants us to repent – to realize we need help.

That's why the Psalmist asks God to **“Be Merciful”** to **“wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin,”** to **“Restore to me the joy of your salvation.”** Because God promised. He wants us to remember that we are dust – to remember that our sin means death – so that we can appreciate the new name he has given us – “Life”.

So in this season of Lent that we begin today, let us walk with repentant hearts and trace the steps of our savior during his Passion. Each Wednesday we'll meet to meditate on what he went through to keep God's promise. Each Wednesday we'll hear another section of the Passion History read, that we may remember the one who became dust for us to destroy the dust-eater. And each week, coming with repentant hearts, we will hear God's proclamation of life. **Remember that you are dust** – and then

remember that God came to breathe into dust the breathe of life. Dust never had it so good – to be embraced in the death and life of Jesus.

Like the hymn-writer wrote:

Christ the Life of all the living, Christ, the Death of death, our foe,

Who, thyself for me once giving To the darkest depths of woe –

Through thy suff'rings death, and merit, I eternal life inherit.

Thousand, thousand thanks shall be, Dearest Jesus, unto thee.

In Christ,

Amen.