
Dust to Dust

A sermon by Canon Todd Smelser
Ash Wednesday – Year C

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

I’ve just finished reading Philip Pullman’s imaginative novel *The Golden Compass*, quoted by Jane Shaw in her book *A Practical Christianity*, in which dust drives the story and governs everything. In this novel, dust consists of particles from another world that cause the knowledge of good and evil—or, in theological language, original sin. The central battles in the book are about discovering the origin and meaning of dust; and for some of the characters in the book, about overcoming the power of dust therefore eliminating the existence of original sin. Coming from the third chapter of the book of Genesis, the phrase, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,” repeated today in thousands of Christian Ash Wednesday liturgies, reminds us of our mortality, and the promise of something better in a future life. But for most of us, whose material quality of life is high, and where life expectancy is pretty long, it is not primarily the thought of a heavenly afterlife that determines our actions. Rather we are guided by love, work, success, relationships and life’s experiences, both good and bad. Our lives are primarily shaped by our attitudes to these things that we live out now. To speak of dust is perhaps to acknowledge our humble beginnings and discern what it means to lead a moral life, a good life, even a godly life.

Dust is a powerful Biblical metaphor, and it speaks both to our beginnings and our endings. In creation we are formed from the dust of the ground. In our death we return to the dust...dust to dust, ashes to ashes. The philosopher Alain de Botton in his book *Status Anxiety*, reminds us that “Dust is the most democratic of substances.” It is the stuff from which we are all created. Jesus certainly reminded his followers of this. On the night before he died, when they came for their last supper, Jesus washed the dust off his disciples’ feet. Typically this action was done by a servant or slave, but on that night Jesus himself washed his disciples’ feet—an action we replicate liturgically on Maundy Thursday. In a deeply hierarchical society, Jesus sets for us a new commandment and a new egalitarian order. Paul certainly understood this when he was writing to the Galatians: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

The Jesus who emerges from the pages of the gospels is a man whose ethical teaching is based on love and the basic equality of all human beings in the eyes of God. He healed on the Sabbath because he wanted people to be healed. He spoke to the woman at the well even though she had a bad reputation. He dined with tax collectors, when they were usually ignored, and touched the dead even though it was utterly taboo to do so; then he brought them back to life. And before he was led to Calvary and to his own death, he washed his disciples’ feet with care, embracing their dust and shattering any notions of high or low, clean or unclean, worthy or unworthy.

In Pullman’s book, *THE GOLDEN COMPASS*, the central characters Lyra and Will learn that the moral life, the good life, is not lived in a dust-free vacuum, but rather is lived in the journey and in the choices that one makes in a complex world filled with pain and suffering as well as joy and hope. If we cannot eradicate dust and sin, there must be an alternative path, some way to grapple with our own sin and morality, and then continue on the journey.

Our Lenten disciple will begin in a moment when we kneel at the altar rail and a priest marks our foreheads with ash,

reminding us anew that we have come from dust, and we will go back to dust. We share the litany of penitence when we state collectively what we have done that was wrong, and what we have left undone. Then we begin our forty days of self-examination and reflection—our Lenten journey.

Originally a time of catechesis and preparation for Baptism at Easter, Lent has become the Church's season of preparation for all of its members. But it's not a spiritual marathon. Lent is not a time of pointless hardship. It's not about giving up chocolate or red wine or even our mobile devices simply to crave them all the more and be miserable. Nor is it an obstacle course to some kind of unattainable perfection. Rather, the season of Lent offers us an opportunity, with perhaps a little more spiritual discipline, to examine our lives, to turn anew to God, and then to look outward. It is a season of transformation—one of hope and promise.

Today's Gospel reading, taken from the middle of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, reminds us of the three traditional pillars of this season—fasting, prayer, and alms giving. Jesus assumed that these forms of piety were already being practiced by his followers, since they were the marks of a good Jew. Jesus, however, was reminding them and us that these actions are not to be done for praise or visibility. Rather, the focus of any of these actions is to bring us closer to God. "Beware of practicing your piety before others," Jesus warns. Rather, when you give to the needy, donate privately; when you pray, pray privately; when you fast, abstain privately; and when you store up treasures, store up treasures of the heart."

This solemn service points to the deep, paradoxical truth of the Christian faith: that those who lose their life for Christ's sake will find it. This liturgy goes to the very heart of the ultimate reality that we all struggle with, death itself. We are reminded, both by the words we say and the burned palms imposed on our foreheads, that we all will die. Our return to dust is inevitable. Maybe the most honest confession that we can make today, is that "we give up" to the false belief that we can control ourselves or our world. It is a day in which God's invitation to return and follow his Son Jesus, is renewed. It is a day in which we can invite God to take control. Or as St. Paul wrote, "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Let us pray:

Merciful God, you called us forth from the dust of the earth; you claimed us for Christ in the waters of baptism. Look upon us as we enter these Forty Days bearing the mark of ashes, and bless our journey through the desert of Lent to the font of rebirth. May our fasting be hunger for justice; our alms, a making of peace; our prayer, the chant of humble and grateful hearts. All this we do and pray in the name of Jesus, for in his cross you proclaim your love for ever and ever. Amen.
(Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers)

I am indebted to a wonderful book *A Practical Christianity: Meditations for the Season of Lent* by Jane Shaw (the Dean of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco) for her thoughtful insights and in recommending *The Golden Compass*.