

Is. 58:1-12 Ps 103

2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10

Mt 6:1-6, 16-21

In the name of God, Source of all,
Who has ever been, is now, and will be forever. *Amen*

Here we are again,
at one of the most significant rituals for Christians.
For a thousand years,
kneeling in a gesture of repentance,
while a gritty, charcoal cross is smudged upon forehead.
Marked as Christ's own,
we step, intentionally, into Lent, walking with Jesus for 40 days,
not counting the 'little' feast days of Sundays, towards His Cross.

Normally, from darkened corner, bookcase or cupboard,
or wherever they might have been unceremoniously stuffed;
we retrieve our unsightly, shriveled-up palms
blessed a year ago at the start of Holy Week.
Collected together now, for one sole purpose
to be set alight in a glorious blaze for a split second,
transformed to become a holy burnt offering, a sign of God with us,
in our suffering and rising again into new life in Christ.
But therein lies the problem.

Because we are nowhere near 'normally'.
For months, I've been listening to clergy chatter across online waves.

How on earth can we mark this significant moment,
when we cannot touch, breath, yea, even be near one another?
Face shields, masks, gloves, distance –
all add layers of barriers to this pinnacle of humbling oneself before God.
One Facebook friend who has suffered a great deal this year,
asked, “Why do we even need to be reminded of our mortality?”
I answered that it’s an opportunity to be reminded of our divinity too.

The impulse is to see only half the equation, our brokenness,
the unbearable weight of sin pressing our heads down low.
The smudge, a painful recognition of human frailty, fallenness, weakness.
Maybe you’ve made the connection that we’re much like those palms,
as the psalmist points out, our days are like grass,
we flourish and fade in an instant. (Ps 103:15-16; 1st Pet. 1:24)

As I thought and thought, “what can we do ‘virtually’ in that moment
when ashes would ‘normally’ be imposed?
What would be most helpful to us,
in these ‘not-even-close-to-normal’ times?

Then divine inspiration came.
I remembered God incarnate. God born among us.
Jesus, stepping into the river Jordan,
His sacred feet entering into the waters of creation.
His life, one of solidarity among all people.

Water.

That precious gift of life, now and eternally.

Jesus uttering these words, “Come to me, all who are thirsty.”

I don’t know about you, but I’m thirsty to remember God’s presence,
His Love, His Grace, His Forgiveness, His Salvation.

I remembered that Jesus became one of us.

He used the common things of the world to communicate real Truth to us.

Bread, Wine, Water.

That’s what we have at our fingertips tonight.

It’s even more poignant to me when I dwell in the words of the gospel.

Jesus admonishing his disciples to enter into repentance

through the age-old practices of alms-giving, prayer and fasting;

not for the purposes of being noticed and commended by others,

but to do these things in secret, not to be seen or rewarded

by anyone other than God who sees in secret and rewards in secret.

It’s always seemed a bit confusing to me; a bit tension filled;

to go stand on a street corner,

offering to emblazon one’s forehead with a cross of black charcoal.

Or to emerge from the Ash Wednesday service,

only minutes later to pop into the grocery store;

while customers awkwardly cast sideways glances

or take drastic evasive maneuvers to avoid the encounter at all costs.

Yes, there will be a few brave souls who've creatively managed a way, to obtain the comfort of the cross of ash upon their forehead.

And... this year, as I say each Sunday, as we adapt to these unprecedented times during Covid-19; I feel confident that by the grace of God; the ordinariness of water will suffice just fine.

In fact, it may be one of the most memorable Ash Wednesdays any of us will ever have; taking the bold step of acknowledging our divinity, marking oneself as Christ's own, simply, through a cross of water. A sacramental gesture of grace invisible and unseen.

Karl Rahner wrote, "With the dust of the earth we trace on our foreheads the sign of the cross, so that what we are in reality can be made perceptible in a sign: people of death, people of redemption." (The Glenstal Book of Readings for the Seasons)
That sign this year urgently proclaims,
"You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Lent is a season in which the verticality of the cross is emphasized. We move along this axis, descending into the depth with Christ, and ascending towards the stars where the heavenly hosts dwell. At first glance, it may be difficult to look upwards, when pain and hardship is staring us down across that horizontal horizon.

This year, as your finger comes into contact with your own face, tracing out a cross of water upon your brow, and the words are uttered, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return”...

Can you also hear the beautiful truth reverberating throughout creation?

“With you I am well pleased.”

The *heart* of the truth is that we are *so much more* than dust, stardust or otherwise.

We remember our humanity *and* we confirm our divinity too; the divine spark that dwells within everything, the gift of the Creator.

The cross is a sign of God’s love, whether we make it with ashes from last year’s palms, or common tap water.

God doesn’t need to remember that we are dust.

God already knows it! For it was God,

who fashioned us of the earth and breathed life into us to begin with!

And true enough, according to the Bible,

that humanity became so perverse at one point,

and perceived rightly so that God was grieved and angered,

imagining that God regretted the making of humanity.

“I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.’

But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.” (v.7-8)

So the story is written,
after forty days and forty nights of raging flood waters,
God *remembered* that we are *God’s dust*.
We might be dust, but we belong to God.
As the waters receded and the land yielded *new growth*,
The Lord *promised*,
“I will never again curse the ground because of humankind...
nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.” (Gen. 9)

While kneeling in our brokenness and fracture,
seeking wholeness once again,
can you feel the waters of baptism quench the fire in your soul?
God has already extended the olive branch of forgiveness,
and God yearns for us to remember how much God loves us.

Let the waters of God’s love wash over each,
a solemn reminder of God’s covenantal love given for us.
“Do this in remembrance of me.”

Amma Susan+