

How we dance to suffering says who we are – Homily for Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58.1–12

Matthew 6.1–6,16–21

Lent begins today. Lent is often associated with the desert. And just as the dust of the desert brings us to the basics of survival, so Lent calls us back to the basics of our faith. The liturgy of Ash Wednesday captures this with great simplicity. We are marked with ash. We are reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return. And yet by this ritual, we bear witness to how we are so much more than dust. We are bodies, yes, but living bodies full of heart, soul, imagination, spirit, and mind. We are persons made in the image of God, made to love without end. As the book of Genesis declares, the dust from which we are made is animated by the breath of God. God gives us a share in his spirit. Like floating particles of dust illuminated by a ray of sunlight, we are set alight to dance in love, freedom, and creativity. This dance is who we are. And our dance is most true, when we live, move, and have our being, have our dust, in openness to God's life-giving spirit.

Lent recalls us to this. And its invitation to dance takes the form of a pilgrimage. One that requires us to discover who we are amid our fragile and suffering world. Let me just say, this has nothing to do with reveling in misery for the sake of it. Yet, so often this is what the Church has done. Indeed, one of the most damning criticisms aimed against Christians is that we are joyless. That the Church lives by distress; it creates distress to make itself relevant. In times such as ours, when we are all too familiar with suffering, there is no place for this. Nothing could be farther from the truth of Christianity. Lent, especially, is a time for us to be serious about the joy of belonging to God. This sets the tune. It

motivates us to confront all in the world that would pulverize us and others into dust and instead dance with the light of truth, justice and, even, joy.

This points to how the desert of Lent, of our world, has already been transformed by the Easter light of Jesus crucified and risen. In his earthly life, Jesus recoiled against suffering. Yet, he willingly faced and overcame suffering, embracing it and making it into the occasion to show the indestructible reality of who he was in relation to the Father in the Holy Spirit. Jesus transformed the dust of suffering by suffering in a way that was true to who he is; by the way his whole being dances with the light of God's love. In doing so Jesus reveals to us a trustworthy path through the suffering. Christ emboldens us to refuse to let suffering define us. From within our vulnerable humanity, he empowers us to transform suffering by how we dance, by the way we make suffering an occasion to show who we truly are in openness to God and others.

This echoes in today's Gospel when Jesus commends the traditional disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving to his disciples. Insofar as we do these things to be praised by others and have them marvel in the dramas of our struggles, our feats of self-denial, or the depth of our generosity, not only do we fail to do justice to the true purpose of these activities. We also end up defining who we are by the standards of worldly success. This is a shallow way of confronting actual suffering. It cannot transform suffering into something meaningful. In the end, it can only cause greater suffering. Instead of using these practices to shore up an identity that will only turn back to dust, Jesus encourages us to use them as ways to discover how to dance as who we truly are in relation to the Father who knows us in a way no suffering can overcome.

Thus, it is good for us to have a regular discipline of prayer. To spend time before God in simple trust and openness. And yet, for many of us, our most honest

prayer might simply be to say before God: 'I cannot pray.' This may seem like failure. Yet by admitting honestly before God that we are but dust, we discover that we are more than just dust, that who we are is held by the love and mercy of God.

Similarly, fasting can help us to confront all the destructive and selfish ways we consume and grasp things and other people. Yet fasting is not meant to lead us to relish our own capacity for self-control. How much more honest to admit fasting is not something we are good at, that we make excuses, or think it a waste of time, or take it to Olympic extremes. Yet we need only, as the prophet Isaiah says, call out and God will say 'Here I am'.

And, finally, almsgiving and acts of service are, of course, concrete ways to live out the vocation to love others and build up the Kingdom of God. And yet, can we not admit that we often do this in a way that distances us from those in need; that we have all kinds of ulterior motives; or that we find being generous a struggle? If so, by opening up our confusion and duplicity to God, again echoing Isaiah, we find that the Lord will guide us and satisfy our needs in parched places and make our bones strong.

Following Christ during Lent is for us to seek to be true to who we are in God's eyes amid a world of suffering. It is to face suffering without despair or denial in openness to God's redemptive love. This is to live honestly in solidarity with others who are not just dust but, as Isaiah says, are those whose 'light shall rise in the darkness'; whose 'gloom be like the noonday.' In this way, with them, in Christ, we blaze a trail to Easter and set the dust of suffering alight with the glory of God who dances in the faces of human persons fully alive though we suffer.