

Homily
Ash Wednesday
March 2, 2022
St. Andrew's, Methuen
William Bradbury

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

"Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

To recognize, as we do today, that we begin as dust and end as dust, is a meaningful discipline for two reasons:

First, acknowledging our dust-nature deflates our pride and selfish ambitions: if I am essentially dust then I am no better than you: dust is dust, so that you and I, along with the person living on the street and the billionaire living on a yacht, are made of the same stuff: the poor and rich may receive different qualities of healthcare, but there is no difference between the flesh and blood getting tested.

Since everyone has the same dust nature, competing to be richer and more successful dust, is like 5-year-olds arguing over whose sand castles is going to look better after the tide comes in.

"Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

But second, when we recognize our dust-nature we are also laying claim to a great mystery and miracle: for how can it be that dust can think, and feel, and love? Dust that we wipe off the tables in our homes, largely dead skin, **is not capable of thinking, feeling, and loving, so something amazing is going on here.**

If we are dust how did our body and its powers appear? And what keeps the dust together in a consistent and conscious form across the years?

The obvious answer for us churchgoers would be to say, "God". God put my dust into this living form and God maintains me moment to moment."

And that is correct.

Reflecting on the mystery of being dust that thinks, feels, and loves, helps us make sense of the gospel reading today.

Jesus teaches us **not to show off how much better my dust looks** than yours by displaying my piety through public praying, giving and fasting.

One trivial example: **I've known countless churchgoers who make sure that by Easter everyone knows what they have given up for Lent:** "Oh, I couldn't possibly eat dessert, dearie, since I've given it up for Lent".

It's a way of earning brownie points by not eating brownies and it is a direct contradiction to Jesus's teaching.

Instead of focusing on the dust, **Jesus teaches us to focus on the God that holds us in existence.** He says go into the secret self to pray, to give, and to fast, so that only God knows anything about it.

In other words, when we **give up** trying to glorify our dust-nature, we are finally free to **take up** communion with God—**the One who is eternally creating and sustaining us in love.**

So, this Lent, we gladly confess that we are dust, so that we may even more gladly confess that our miraculous life belongs to God—not so we can lord it over others, but so we can serve others, just as we are served by Christ, the Word made dust.