
Remember That You Are Dust and to Dust You Shall Return

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Palm Sunday – Year B

Unedited transcript:

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

We heard these words on Ash Wednesday when ashes were imposed on our foreheads, looking forward to this week, to the death of Jesus. And every Ash Wednesday, I have the same experience as we go through our liturgy imposing ashes on the foreheads of those who have gathered in prayer.

Invariably, I come upon a young child or a youth who looks up at me with bright eyes, so full of life, so much ahead of them. And there I am imposing ashes. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Usually I just breathe deeply and move on to the next person.

But there's something about that moment, which is worth pausing and considering, because I think we just generally fear death. We have a high anxiety about what death might be like and what happens after death, and we're afraid of it and would prefer not to think about it. And I think that's reasonable. It's not as if life allows us to climb up to the top of a tower, overlooking the boundary between this world and the next so that we can see what will happen and be comfortable.

Instead, we are left with the fear and anxiety of death, and that can be problematic when we come to Holy Week, when we come to the passion gospel where the physical and psychological torture that Jesus experiences causes us to step back all the more. It stimulates our fear and anxiety until that suffering is all that we can consider.

I remember a reading of the passion narrative right here in this space. There was a youth sitting right over there who immediately after the reading fainted, his head hit the pew right in front of him. There was a very loud sound. And when we came and collected him and got him finally to the hospital and he came to, the doctor looked him and said, "What happened?" His response was this. "It was awful. They just hung him on the cross and left him there."

That physical and psychological pain can be all that we see. Yet if we are to understand the meaning of Christ's death, and in fact, what follows the Resurrection and the Ascension, we'll have to see more than those symbols of our own fear and anxiety. We'll have to understand death through the lenses of Jesus's life.

Because you see, we are all condemned to death. We are all going to stand where Jesus stood. For we are dust and to dust we shall return. And though part of us will die, there is another part that can experience eternal life. And as we look at Jesus's life, what we will see is a constant letting go, a constant surrender, a constant giving of himself.

And our task then as followers of Christ is not to look at that, but to become that. Not to watch the ministry of Jesus, but to be like Jesus. And so our life too will need to be centered around a surrender, a giving away, a letting go.

We will have to let go of all of those parts of life that we cling to so desperately. Our health, our physical wellbeing, our ego, our pride, our possessions. The relationships of people that have died and gone before us.

Our expectations for the opportunities for the rest of our lives. All of those things we will have to learn to let go of as Jesus did.

And what we will experience with each event of letting go is a freedom. A freedom that we will feel before we recognize. A freedom to be who we are. A freedom to engage others more freely.

This is the wonder of letting go. It generates an energy we can use to connect with other people. It leaves us feeling more available to other people, and them to us. It is the essence of community, really. Letting go of all of those parts of life that we hold so deeply will make us available to others in a way that leaves us feeling fully alive.

And that is the message, the good news of Jesus's life. So as we began to think about our own death, think about it in terms of being a final gift, not something to fear and be anxious about as if our life were so rudely interrupted and our opportunities so dramatically taken from us. But instead, the opportunity to be available to others, the opportunity to make our last gift, the opportunity to extend ourself and be joyful.

If this takes a moment to resonate with you, let me give you an example. I saw a video recently of a friend's mother. She contracted COVID in a nursing home over the last year and ultimately breathed her last. But as her last moment was approaching, her family was allowed to gather. Some gathered in her room, some gathered outside her window because there was not enough space for all of them.

And as they gathered there with the matriarch of the family dying, they sang, they cried, they laughed. There she was, having given them her spirit all of their lives. There they were a family, a community having let go of all of the things that separated them from each other and finding a new intimacy in that moment. A glimpse I think of eternal life.

That's what it means to let your death be a gift, I think. It will take all of the rest of our lives to learn how to do that as if the constant practice of letting go transforms us into the kind of person who can be available to others, to love them, to extend to them the joy of life, even at our last moment.

So as you head into Holy Week, I want you to hold on to that thought that the way Jesus has died was not just suffering through physical and psychological torture, but instead letting go even of his physical and psychological being for us. Surrendering to God in a way that exhibited pure love for us.

And our transformation occurs when we become like Jesus. When we accept the truth of those words, remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. There's something about accepting the truth of that, which gives us life, freedom to love, a willingness to give true life. Amen.