
The Practice of Humility

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Salmoon Bashir
Ash Wednesday – Year A

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Every year, as Ash Wednesday approaches, a familiar question returns: What are you giving up for Lent? Coffee, chocolate, social media or something else. It is a natural question. Sometimes practical, sometimes casual, sometimes deeply sincere. But there is an assumption that Lent is mostly about discipline, about surrendering small comforts.

There is some truth in that. But before we decide what to give up for Lent, today on Ash Wednesday we should ask of ourselves not the question of what we do, but who we are.

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

These words are not symbolic or metaphorical reference. They are plain speech. Dust, earth, soil, mud, ground. The very substance from which God created humanity and Ash Wednesday brings us back to that beginning.

The essence of Ash Wednesday is this plain truth: “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” And it is important we remember that these words do not shame or insult us. They are meant to ground us, to humble us. The very beginning of humility is this realization that we belong to God and not to ourselves.

The Gospel we just heard, Jesus gives a clear message: “Beware of practicing your piety and righteousness before others in order to be seen by them.” He speaks about prayer. He speaks about fasting. He does not reject these things. He commands them. But he tells us not to become actors and performers in our own spiritual lives, turning faith into something we display rather than something we live.

It is possible to pray in ways that draw attention to us. It is possible to fast in ways that quietly advertise our discipline.

The danger is not that we will not pray. The danger is that we will pray to be seen. Similarly, the danger is not that we will not fast. The danger is that we will fast to be admired.

Two words help us hear this clearly: Humility and Hypocrisy.

Humility is rooted in the language of the earth itself. Humility comes from the Latin *Humi – li- tas*, ---- *Humus*, soil, ground, earth. To be humble is to be grounded, to stand on the truth of who we are. We are creatures, not the Creator. We depend on God for every breath. We are dirt, mud, clay that has been given life by God.

Humility is not thinking less of ourselves. It is seeing ourselves truthfully, standing before God, without exaggeration and without illusion. It is recognizing both our gifts and our weaknesses. It is knowing that we are not self-made and never self-sufficient.

At the heart of our faith is this mystery: life comes through death. Every act of humility is a kind of dying — a kind of falling to the ground, into the soil of God’s mercy, so that from that death something new might grow.

Hypocrisy, on the other hand, comes from the world of the theater. In Greek, a *Hypokritēs* referred to an actor,

pretender, someone wearing masks, playing a role, someone who appeared to be what they were not.

Humility is standing before God as we are. Hypocrisy creates a version of ourselves to be seen by others.

When Jesus warns against hypocrisy, he is not condemning religious practices. He is warning against turning spiritual life into theater.

This temptation is not hard to understand in our own time because we live in a world where being seen matters so much. We often worry about how we appear to others, about comments and likes on social media photos and posts, and at times even faith becomes something we curate, something we present.

But Jesus gives us prayer and fasting not as spiritual achievements but as practices that reshape us and reform us. Which is precisely why prayer and fasting matter.

Prayer is humility before God. It reminds us that we are not in control. We spend much of our lives planning, managing, and fixing, often living as though everything depends on us. Prayer interrupts this rhythm.

In prayer we acknowledge dependence. We bring our fears, our failures, our gratitude, and we place them before God.

In prayer we do not bring our achievements. We do not pretend to be strong. When Jesus speaks of praying in secret, he is not suggesting that public prayer is wrong. After all, we are gathered here to pray together. Jesus is pointing us toward honesty, our inner selves, in secret, where there is no audience, no performance, no one to impress.

Fasting works differently. It is humility before ourselves. It shows how easily our desires can become habits, and our habits become necessities.

Many comforts begin to feel like needs and many desires begin to feel like rights. We start to think, I want SO I must have.

Fasting is supposed to create a space between wanting and having. Fasting breaks the assumption that every impulse must be obeyed.

It helps us pay attention and ask honest questions: What comforts have become necessities? What upsets me when it is taken away? What truly rules my life?

In fasting and as a result, hunger reveals things. It tells the truth about us. It shows us not only physical hunger, but deeper desires, our need for comfort, distraction, or control. Fasting helps us notice habits and attachments we rarely question, things that feel necessary but are simply familiar.

Which is why Jesus warns us about theatrical and performative fasting. Do not look miserable. Do not advertise deprivation. Because fasting like prayer can easily become performance.

Here is the deeper connection between prayer and fasting.

Prayer teaches dependence on God. Fasting teaches freedom from our impulses. Together, they humble us, free us from the sin of pride, and begin to heal the illusion that we are the center of everything. **Prayer and Fasting.**

Coming back to that familiar question, our familiar discussion at the beginning of Lent.

What are you giving up for Lent? Perhaps the better questions are these:

What illusions am I releasing? What performances am I stepping away from?
What masks am I ready to lay down?

The ashes mark us with a truth we often avoid, that we are mortal. We are finite. We will return to the earth. Yet this truth is not meant to disturb us. It is meant to free us.

If we are dust, we do not need to pretend to be more than we are. If we are dust, we do not need to prove our worth through performance. We can let go of the mask. We can admit our need for mercy. When we stop pretending to be strong and self-sufficient, we become free to be honest rooted in humility.

Honest in prayer. Honest in fasting. Honest about our need for God's mercy. And in that honesty, we rediscover humility. We rediscover the grace of God who formed us from the earth and who in Christ entered that same earth.

Lent, then, is not a season of spiritual performance. It is a season of truth. A season of returning — returning to prayer that is real, returning to fasting that is freeing, freeing from hypocrisy and returning to humility. Returning to the soil of God's mercy.

The ashes we receive today speak of both ending and beginning. The same earth to which we return is the earth from which we were formed. The same dust that reminds us of death is the dust God once gathered in His hands and breathed into life.

The God who formed us from dust has already entered that dust. The One who shaped the earth has walked upon it.

When these ashes are placed upon us, remember that We are created, not self-made. We are dependent, not self-sufficient and remember that we are mortal, not permanent.

Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Amen!