

March magazine

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19)

During March we come again to Ash Wednesday and Lent, traditionally, the time of self-examination. The English word *Lent* is a shortened form of the Old English word *lencten*, meaning "spring season".

Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday, is the time for confession, repentance, and feasting before the fasting season. The name "Shrove" comes from the Old English word *shriven*, meaning to confess sins and receive absolution. Lent which follows Ash Wednesday is a period of introspection that ends with the great celebration of Easter and is known in the Eastern Orthodox church as the season of "bright sadness". The purpose of Lent is the preparation of the believer for Easter through prayer, repentance, almsgiving, simple living, and self-denial. In Lent, many Christians commit to giving up favourite luxuries to imitate Jesus' sacrifice of food and water during his journey into the desert for 40 days to draw themselves nearer to God.

Between Shrove Tuesday and Lent is the service for Ash Wednesday. After the placing of ash on the forehead of each person these words are said, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." Here the Church reminds each person of their mortality and invites us to self-examination and repentance, through prayer, fasting and spiritual discipline. This is the journey back to our 'dustness.' and these are the practices that direct us to that "secret place" where God resides. Many people feel this service has a too sombre feel but in fact "To dust you shall return" is not God's threat or punishment or a statement about bodily decay after death, but it is a statement of God's faithfulness and love for us and the promise of resurrected life in Jesus Christ.

In John's Gospel, Jesus promises that he will "take us to where he is, to prepare a place for us". Sometimes in our busy lives we forget we have that place to go to. As I look at my own life and listen to the stories of others, I realize that most of us have at some point found our place in life founded on what others say to us, what

others think and their expectations for us, or on the presence or absence of someone else in our life. We tend to forget, ignore, and sometimes even deny our 'dustness' so we spend our lives trying to create another place for ourselves where we live our lives on the outside and our identity becomes externalized. Here, people become objects and separation, disintegration and isolation characterize our existence and soon everything seems literally 'out of place.'

Jesus calls us back to the interior life asking us to live life from the inside, to move our "place" from the outer world to the inner world, to let go of living our lives before others to be seen, judged, and approved by them. This 'letting go' is the 'Amen' of our Lenten discipline. Giving, prayer, and fasting in secret are the ways we begin to break our dependence on the approval of others. However, it is not so much about *how* we give, pray, or fast, but it is about *where*. When we move into that secret place with God, we no longer depend on others to give us our identity, or give us our place in life, but in that secret place we remember that we are dust and there we see that our identity, who we are, is who we are in God.

Ash Wednesday and Lent reminds us of that place and allows us to journey again towards it. The realisation we are dust is not a negative, an insult or a judgment. It means we look at the reality of who we are, where we have been, and where we are going. The Church is not saying remember that you are "nothing but dirt" but instead we are being reminded that our life begins and ends in God, to recall that God scooped together handfuls of sacred star dust from which the Universe was made and breathed His own self into it and breathed us into existence.

Now, God has chosen us to be the containers of His divine breath, and life, and despite the changes and chances of life, the pain of our losses, the fear of the unknown, we are, we always have been, and we always will be His beloved sons and daughters.

Have a blessed and reflective Lent and may you be reminded of your sacred place in God's heart.

Rev James

