

Ash Wednesday 2009

You know Jay Sidebotham by now ... he's the cartoonist who draws those charming poster calendars we put out at Advent and at Lent. Be sure to pick yours up today from the table by the name tags. Anyway, Jay is an Episcopal priest with a wry sense of humor, and a gift for getting to the heart of things. And there is a cartoon by him hanging in the church office right now called ...

"The Rector responds to concerns that Lent is too depressing."

The picture is of a blonde priest imposing ashes on the forehead of a well-dressed man. And she says, "Remember that you are dust. But a very high-quality sort of dust."

Well that gets at all of it doesn't it? Our discomfort with our own mortality and sin, our insistence on maintaining some sort of self-esteem, our desire to make God and faith and the church more palatable and less threatening, more affirming and less provoking. And all of us who feel like we have the spiritual chops to even turn up in church on Ash Wednesday can feel very hard-core and righteous now, bearing up under the dreadful weight of the words I am about to say ... "remember that you are dust. And to dust you shall return."

But I think the cartoon is on to something deep as well, once you get past its mild mockery of our insecurities. Because I think that actually, we would do well to remember not only that we are dust and to dust we shall return, but that we actually ARE a very high-quality sort of dust.

This phrase you see, comes straight out of scripture – Genesis 3:19 to be exact. It comes at the point where God drives Adam and Eve out of the garden for having disobeyed God, and eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

And God describes for them the consequences of their actions, telling Adam how difficult it will be for him to till the soil and feed his family. God says, “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. You are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

But this is a VERY high quality sort of dust. Because earlier in the story, God forms the man from the dust of the ground. It’s a Hebrew pun ... he forms Adam from *adamah*, the word for soil. Our English version might be ... God formed human from the dust of the humus.

God formed human from the humus. This is not a scientific statement and it has nothing to do with the very real evidence that our species evolved over a long period of time from other, similar life forms. People lay so much baggage on this story from Genesis that we can’t get to the heart of it. And at its heart, this business of dust and soil is a deep and theological statement.

God took the dust of the soil, and breathed God’s own spirit into it, and made humanity. That is a theological description of our physical reality. We are dirty, dusty beings, made of the same elements, the same minerals, the same molecular compounds, the same DNA in large part, as many, many other animals, and plants, and the earth itself. But we are also infused with the very spirit of God. We are connected – simultaneously – to all of creation, and also, most intimately, to its Creator.

And this action we are about to perform, this tracing of an ashy cross of repentance on our foreheads, is designed to remind us of that connection, and to open our eyes to all the many ways we fail to live our lives in a way worthy of that connection.

Because all of our lives can be encompassed in that simple gesture. “Remember that you are dust.” The ashy, carbon stroke comes down, the vertical line that symbolizes our sacred connection to God. Earth-born creatures that we are, carbon-based life forms ourselves, made of dust, yes, but a high quality sort of dust that is given its quality, its dignity, its grace, by the animating spirit of God. We are earth creatures, but we are also God creatures.

Then the horizontal stroke, and the words ... “And to dust you shall return.” The mark describes our end, our finitude, our mortality, the final statement of truth. Our mortal bodies will die, decay and disappear, just like everything else on this earth. Adam back to *adamah*, human back to humus.

The challenge of Lent, I believe, is learning how to live in both of these realities, the vertical and the horizontal, the Spirit and the soil, the immortal and the mortal, the unending life and the definitive end. For some of us, the challenge lies in believing the truth of that vertical stroke – that God made us, God loves us, God has infused us with God’s own Spirit so that we might be God’s presence in the world. For others, the challenge comes in facing the truth of the horizontal line – that we will die. In a time and place and manner that will not be of our choosing, most likely. We can try to run away from our own death, but we can’t run forever.

And so we must repent in dust and ashes. First, for treating our high-quality dust like plain old dust. For denying our own God-given life, for squandering it on this and that and the other small thing, on acquiring and spending, on squabbling and hurt feelings, for failing every day to let that loving Spirit animate us, for failing to care for one another as other God-infused creatures, for failing to care for our lives and the gifts God has given us as the sacred and holy treasures that they really are.

But we must also repent for denying our own God-determined deaths. For acting like we have all the time in the world to get around to the business of being God’s children. When we don’t. For acting like this moment in time, our moment, our lives, are of the most supreme importance in all of history. When they aren’t. For failing to remember that when it’s over, it’s over and we don’t get a second chance to do it over or to make it right. As the saying goes, this is not a dress rehearsal.

Remember that you are dust. A very high-quality dust, I must say. But also remember that to dust you must return, ready or not.

As you ponder these two realities today, tomorrow, and for the next six weeks, I will remind you that these two strokes, the vertical and the horizontal, intersect. And they form the shape of a cross. And the shape of the cross shows us how these two competing forces are reconciled in the life and death of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, we see the power of a life turned over completely to God, completely infused by God, completely abandoned to God's dream for the world. But we also see his willing acceptance of his own death, and his own mortality. He was not afraid to lay his human body on the line for God's own kingdom.

But we are. Often. Even when we would like to be different. And that is the good news, my friends, of Lent and all it offers us, all the way up to the darkness of Good Friday.

Because where we fail, Jesus succeeds. Where we fear, he is fearless. Where we lose our faith, he remains faithful. Where we are imbalanced, out of plumb, unable to bear the tension between being God's children and being children of dust, he holds that tension in perfect balance, upon his outstretched arms, nailed to a wooden cross.

So come forward. Receive the ashes. Stand in the tension. And remember ...