

ashes to ashes
a sermon preached on
ash wednesday
14 February 2018
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by father ken hewlett

the lections: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51; 2 Corinthians 5: 20b - 6.10; Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21.

Each Ash Wednesday I am reminded of the words of the committal prayer of the Funeral service which says "We here commit the body of our dear sister/brother to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust"

A form of those words are spoken for the very first time in the garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God says to them - "Dust thou art, and to dust thou shall return."

Dust to dust, ashes to ashes. A stark reminder of from whence we arose and to whence, all other factors being equal, we shall return. We are by nature and deed - a walking, talking, thinking, doing package of dust and ashes.

There is not much value in dust and ashes. Gardeners know that it can be used to help grow plants - but basically it is worthless. In fact it is often less than worthless - it is a hindrance and a liability. You can't make it pretty by painting it, or smell good by spraying perfume on it. Dust is dust, ashes are ashes - and the plain fact is they both are largely to be avoided.

And that is us too. When all is said and done - our righteousness is like rags upon us; our virtue is but a spray of perfume upon thoughts and feelings and deeds that are best buried and forgotten.

So why do we bother today smearing ashes on our foreheads? Why do we gather and remember what we are on this first day of Lent?

Well - the answer is that while we gather to remember who we are, we also gather to remember who God is - and what God has done for us in and through Jesus.

We gather - because - all other factors are not equal.

God has given us a way out of our plight of "ashes to ashes, dust to dust". It is the way of the Cross. The death of Jesus was God's way of placing a sign of infinite value upon that which would otherwise be worthless. Today it is for us to know and realize that God has chosen to give us some other life than that which leads to the dust heap and the ash pit.

And all that God asks of us in this is that we accept his mercy, that we remember we are sinners, and repent and believe in his Son.

And he asks us too that we try to practice a piety that is based on his love - instead of being motivated by thoughts of human praise or reward, that we try to show a righteousness that is based on his goodness - instead of being motivated by thoughts of demonstrating our virtue.

God has committed himself to us - and given to us a sign of that commitment - the cross. Today we come to take upon ourselves that sign - we come to commit ourselves to God and the way that his Son has shown us.

We come to remember the words of the committal service, the words that do not stop with "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust", but continue on to say "in sure and certain hope

of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change the body of our low estate that it may be like unto his glorious body."

These words we should always remember - for we are born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ - a hope that comes to us because of the mercy and the love of God for his people; a hope that comes because God has acted in and through Jesus to open the way to new life to all who repent and believe in the good news that he proclaimed.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory. Amen.