

Dear Friends and Faithful,

Ash Wednesday 2024

While we may not all be able to be together in our worshipping community, we remain together in spirit, purpose and prayer. Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, recalling Christ's 40 day fast in the wilderness, is our call to preparation for the great Paschal celebration; the Passion, Sacramental Institution, Death and Resurrection of Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God.

For the faithful, this marks a period of penitence and penance, though we must take care to keep these things squarely within the context of the absolute character of our Maker, known to us in and through Jesus. We should remain mindful of what lies at the heart of the Pascal Mystery: Christ's death illustrates the absolute, unfailing love of God, and his resurrection illustrates the absolute, unfailing power and universal efficacy of that love.

At the customary ceremony of 'ashing', are spoken the words, "Remember thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return", from Genesis 3:19. These should not be seen as a means of dragging us down into a mire of unmitigated guilt. Neither we, nor Holy Church should allow them to be utilised as a tool of power, constantly applying the yoke of condemnation.

The power of Christ is that, which we must recognise as ours: Jesus' constant emphasis, in his example and teaching, overwhelmingly reverberates with the singular power of recognising his forgiveness. How can we conceive the need for Church or religion to resort to the damning power of annihilistic judgement, when it is love that conquers all.

I love the hymn: Rock of ages, cleft for me,
 Let me hide myself in thee;
 Let the water and the blood,
 From thy riven side which flowed,
 Be of sin the double cure,
 Cleanse me from its guilt and power.

Fear encourages no one; love is affirmative and creative. Penitence is not for dragging us down; it is for raising us up. Death with resurrection is not comprehensible as our future unless it is ours as we realise Jesus' absolute and all-powerful love, given already in his gift of dying for me (us) and living for me (us).

Every moment of realisation of Jesus' gift is a moment of eternal transformation. The transformation is made even when we forget: moments of penitence are moments of transformative remembrance, inviting us immediately to stand again before our welcoming Lord and God, realising afresh that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

As I pray for each of you on your Lenten journey, I ask your prayers as your pastor and servant in Christ, that I remain ever faithful to my calling never to be judge of any, but source of affirmation and remembrance of the generous, free and loving gift of divine grace.

Grace, peace and love, as ever,
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