



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Wednesday, March 2, 2022
Ash Wednesday

The Solemn Liturgy of Ash Wednesday
12pm and 5:30pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

on
Genesis 3:19

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‘From Dust to glory’
Matchwood to Immortal Diamond

Our Lenten journey begins with a simple yet dramatic symbolic action; ashes, placed on our foreheads in the sign of the cross, with words that echo the words of God to Adam and Eve in the story of the fall – *“Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”* (Genesis 3:19)

And what is this ash? The product of a chemical reaction that results in carbon. It is easy to think that this ash, this carbon, is worthless and that, by extension, the marking of our foreheads somehow reminds us that we are worthless. This is not so. Carbon is the element found in all known life forms and is the second largest element found in the human body. In essence, it is the stuff of which we are made; all life on this planet – plants and animals - depends on this sixth element of the periodic table. And carbon exists in our planet in different forms, so that what we see here today as mere ash, also has the potential to become the most precious form of carbon on the planet – formed by intense heat, and pressure inside the earth itself – to create a diamond. Yes, dust can become glorious!

So, my friends, Lent begins not simply with a reminder of our mortality, but also that our lives are filled with potential; that we can seek change – to turn around our lives which, of course, is the meaning of the world repentance.

The ashes are marked on our forehead in the sign of the cross; to those who do not believe, it is a symbol of death but to us, the transformation of dust into glory. This signing of the cross with ash will remind us that our lives are, in fact, full of worth because we live in hope. Jesus, God’s Son, came among us and died on a cross to reconcile the whole world to himself. On a day when we recall our sinfulness, we also recall that our God is not a vengeful God, but a God who is moved with compassion out of love for us, who are made in his image.

Speaking of God’s compassion, Henri Nouwen says this:

“Compassion is such a deep, central and powerful emotion in Jesus that it can only be described as a movement of the womb of God. There, all the divine tenderness and gentleness lies hidden...When Jesus was moved to compassion, the source of all life

trembled, the ground of all love burst open, and the abyss of God's immense, inexhaustible, and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself."

When Jesus was moved to compassion, the source of all life trembled!

How is this possible? Through Jesus! God in Christ entered our world and shared all that it was to be human; he experienced all emotions, all fears, and all hopes. In the incarnation, God made himself vulnerable for our sakes. God came close to us when we were afraid to come close to him.

In his book 'Love's endeavor, love's expense', WH Vanstone says, "*The activity of the Creator in the world must be precarious.*" That is how much God loves us - loves you and me, that he makes himself precarious out of love of us.

In a few moments we will be able to have ash placed on our foreheads. However, we must remember that it is a mark of the *beginning* of our Lenten journey and not an end in itself. At the end of our Lenten journey, we will celebrate that precariousness of God's love when we commemorate the passion and death of Jesus Christ in which he reversed the consequences of sin, affording us hope. His cold lifeless body was placed in the tomb, but the carbon of which that body was made was transfigured and glorified on the third day. Yes, my friends, we know the end of the story even at the beginning of Lent! So, Ash Wednesday is a beautiful day – if you like, the first day of Spring for the Christian because the ash reminds us not of death but of the hope of glory. As St. Paul says writing to the Philippians, "*we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body.*" (See Philippians 3: 20-21)

Dust and glory!

Let me share with you one of Gerard Manley's Hopkins greatest poems, written the year before his untimely death as he reflected on mortality and after a period of depression; in it, he contrasts the carbon of which we mortals are made and to which we are seemingly destined to return to with how the resurrection has changed everything:

'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection.'

Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows | flaunt forth, then chevy on an air-
Built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs | they throng; they glitter in marches.
Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, | wherever an elm arches,
Shivelights and shadowtackle in long | lashes lace, lance, and pair.
Delightfully the bright wind boisterous | ropes, wrestles, beats earth bare
Of yestertempest's creases; | in pool and rut peel parches
Squandering ooze to squeezed | dough, crust, dust; stanches, starches
Squadroned masks and manmarks | treadmire toil there
Footfretted in it. Million-fuelèd, | nature's bonfire burns on.
But quench her bonniest, dearest | to her, her clearest-selvèd spark
Man, how fast his firedint, | his mark on mind, is gone!
Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark
Drowned. O pity and indig | nation! Manshape, that shone
Sheer off, disseveral, a star, | death blots black out; nor mark
Is any of him at all so stark
But vastness blurs and time | beats level. Enough! the Resurrection,
A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping, | joyless days, dejection.
Across my foundering deck shone
A beacon, an eternal beam. | Flesh fade, and mortal trash
Fall to the residuary worm; | world's wildfire, leave but ash:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.