

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

Wednesday, February 22, 2023

Ash Wednesday

The Solemn Liturgy of Ash Wednesday

5:30 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

*on*

Isaiah 58:1-12; II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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## Remember that thou art dust

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Remember that thou art dust.

It is a terrifyingly vulnerable thing to discover yourself

Fully seen.

Fully known.

And, despite it all,

Fully loved. By the one who sees all the secret places of our hearts. By God.

Terrifying, in part, because it demands response.

Will we *let* ourselves be seen, known, loved?

Will we *let* that seeing, that knowing, that loving

Shape us?

Will we discover ourselves anew, alive,

In the loving regard of the one who *truly* loves us?

And perhaps the most terrifying question of all:

Will we *let* that love, *trust* that love, to judge us?

Remember that thou art dust.

That's a remembrance that we generally resist.

Surely we're more than that.

Surely God wants to see more than that.

Surely we're better than that.

But it's a salutary remembrance

A liberating remembrance

And this is where we must start today:

Remember that thou art dust.

Jesus' understanding of hypocrisy in our Gospel

Has a lot to do with a public performance of religiosity

in order to personally reap the social benefits

of being *perceived* as righteous, of *being seen* by other people to be good

Without having to make any real sacrifices for the sake of the good.

This is Isaiah's critique as well.

If we look good, if we're *seen* to be good, then maybe we actually are.

For a very long time, and perhaps for some still, now,  
That's what the church was to many:  
A place to perform a kind of righteous put-togetherness that might pass for goodness,  
An opportunity to show others that we're doing okay. We're church goers. We're alright.  
We're good folks. We're not broken. We're not wounded. We don't have problems.  
We're respectable. We don't struggle. We're okay. We go to church.  
The difficulty is: that's never what church was for.  
The church has always been a hospital for sinners.  
We are wounded. We do have problems. We do struggle.  
And we could help each other in our struggles  
If we would actually allow ourselves to be seen.  
If we could be honest about our wounds.  
If we could consent to be the dust we are.  
And this means allowing ourselves to be seen by God  
Not as we might like God to see us  
Not as we might curate ourselves for God  
But as we are: a fallen and sinful people,  
A wounded and struggling people  
A sin-sick and broken people  
So that God's vision of us  
Piercing to the very depths of us  
Can shape us  
Into the people of grace  
That God has called us to be  
That God has always imagined us to be.  
And what we are being asked to do this day, this Lent  
Is to allow God to see us  
Not because God *doesn't* see us  
But because if we *allow* God to see us, if we will consent to being seen,  
We will not resist the grace of God's vision of us.  
And make no mistake, I'm not suggesting that any of this is easy  
Or even conventionally desirable.  
Those rewards of being seen in secret that Jesus talks about?  
Paul names them: afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, sleepless nights,  
hunger, being perpetually misunderstood,  
all for the sake of love, for the sake of justice, for the sake of righteousness,  
real self-sacrificial goodness,  
The expectation, shared by Jesus and Isaiah, being that  
Living the faith will necessarily have public consequences:  
There is no private religion worth the name;  
The fast you undertake in private is meant to pitch you out  
Not to some grand recognition of *your* piety or goodness,  
But toward your *neighbor's* good, *another's* good...  
Otherwise it's not religion at all,  
but a vaguely spiritualized hobby of dubious meaning, value, or merit.  
Indeed: religion without sacrifice is pernicious.  
So allowing ourselves to be seen by God: there are transformative consequences.  
The breaking of oppression's yoke will not be welcomed by everyone.  
We *will be seen* in a certain way by the world, but the only vision that matters is God's.  
In that vision, we are dispossessed of the performance of righteousness,  
Of the simulacrum of righteousness that is in fact human sin  
Dispossessed even of ourselves, of anything that is not God,

And yet having nothing that is not God, we possess everything that *is* God  
Because God's All possesses us: holds our dust,  
supplies us with an endless glory of goodness that has always been mean for us.  
So, yes, being seen by God will turn our world upside down  
and lay us bare before the naked Reality of Love that is God  
and that desires to transform us into love.  
And of course there's more,  
Because what Lent shows us, what Lent insists on showing us  
What Lent brings us to understand in the journey from this day to Good Friday  
Is that the eyes with which we must be seen  
Are the eyes of the one we human beings killed on the cross of Calvary  
The blood-bleared eyes of Jesus Christ  
In whose sight  
We recognize ourselves as we are, as a people who  
—death-infected, sin burdened and wrath-poisoned—  
Would use all the power at our disposal, all the rightness of which our dust is capable,  
all the contempt and impatience and rage of an empire  
To kill and condemn a man whose only "crime" is that he loved us with all his being,  
And who even now refuses to condemn us.  
No, enduring the vision of God is not easy.  
But it is needful  
Because in the cross, we see something else, too:  
Not just the fruit of our sin  
But God desiring to be seen by us  
completely giving himself to us and for us  
Pouring out the infinite depths of his immortal life  
into our finite, mortal, sin-darkened and death-infected hearts.  
We see that our wrath, our death-centeredness, is exhausted in him and by him.  
We see our finite contempt, our sinfulness, coming to an end  
As it is met with an infinite ocean of love  
We see in the wounded heart of the God-Man Jesus  
An opening onto eternal life  
And we glimpse, in the light of this Life, in the Light of this Love,  
The Blinding Light of the Cross,  
We glimpse, we see, who we were made to be:  
The one in whose image we were made to be  
And we see that this light of mercy and of grace is meant for us, is reaching out for us  
And we know beyond any shadow of a doubt  
God's judgment on our lives.  
Because in the cross, make no mistake,  
God sees us, and yes, God judges us:  
God has declared judgement on the world, on us,  
On all of humanity  
And the awful dread judgement of God on us  
Is:  
Grace  
Gift  
Life everlasting  
And joy unlimited  
And peace beyond understanding  
And forgiveness beyond all imagining.  
If we would go to the foot of the cross,

We would discover that nothing is more precious to the Almighty God of Infinite Majesty  
Than our little human dust  
And we need no longer fruitlessly labor to be more or better by our own power:  
We can be marvelously precious in God's eyes, by his power, by his unmerited grace.  
This, too, is what it means to be seen by God.

Will you be seen by God this day? This Lent?  
Will you let grace open you to the harrowing healing of God?  
Will you let God love your weakness and your pain?  
Will you let your crucified Lord see you in the dark and secret places of your heart,  
and love you, even there?  
Will you let the nail-pierced hands of your Lord, your truest Friend  
Tenderly gather up the dust of your life and give it his own glory,  
Even as in him our glorified dust is seated at the Father's right hand on heaven's high throne?  
Will you become by grace the very righteousness of God alive in the world?  
Will you let God see you?  
If you would, then first: Remember that thou art dust.  
In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.