

St Nicholas' Anglican Church, Mordialloc, Sunday 10th March, 2019 (First Sunday in Lent)

Revd Dr Sharne Rolfe, Vicar

Readings:

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Ps 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:4-13

Luke 4:1-15

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Sermon: "Keep death daily before your eyes."

Quite a number of you attended our Ash Wednesday service this week. During the Ash Wednesday service, the priest marks the forehead of each person with the sign of the cross in ashes, saying "Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you will return". These are sobering words, some might even say morbid words. Why, when our faith is about love and hope, light and joy, fullness of life in Christ, why would we focus on death in this way, reminding ourselves of the fleeting nature of life, and the inevitably of the earthly end that awaits us all?

We live in a society that to a large extent tries very hard to keep death hidden. It isn't like this in other places in the world. Traveling through India a couple of years ago, I was surprised to see how public death is in some of the places I visited. I frequently saw funeral processions with the body of the deceased being taken through crowded public spaces. Sadly, I also witnessed the very public death of an impoverished person by the side of the roadside. None of these events were unusual for the local people. Death for them was a common part of life. Here, however, we try to hide death away. And as a society, we spend many millions of dollars every year trying to make ourselves look and feel younger than we really are. We try to kid ourselves that death is not our reality. And yet it is: Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you will return. Why do we say these words on Ash Wednesday? Why this focus on our mortal selves?

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent and it is an echo of the Hebrew Bible's ancient call to sackcloth and ashes, a continuing cry across the centuries that life is transient, and that change, remediation of our lives and our lifestyle, therefore, is urgent. We don't have time to waste, we can't afford to dillydally on the road to God. Lent is a time to reflect on all the time we've spent playing with dangerous distractions and addictions, and convincing ourselves they don't matter, that there's plenty of time left to amend our ways. In Lent we are called to repent of our senseless excesses and our excursions into sin, our breaches of justice, our failures of honesty, our estrangement from God, our absorbing self-gratifications. Lent is a time when we need to get back in touch with our true selves, with the hidden God-given things we try so hard to ignore. As we say before each and every Christian meditation session: "Show me the hidden things. Take me down to the spring of my life, and tell me my nature and my name." Lent is a time when we are given a God-given opportunity of freedom to grow, so that we may become our true selves, the fulfilment of the seed which God planted in us at our making. Remembering the finite nature of our earthly life helps get that process of true freedom - getting in touch with our true selves - underway.

In one of the most compelling set of rules ever written for the monastic life, St. Benedict instructs his monks in Chapter 4 (The Tools of Good Works) to "Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die" (RB 4:47). That verse has grown famous in an older translation: "Keep death daily before your eyes." A popular, modern take on this is that it is creepy and morbid. The fact is that St. Benedict's point is not to grow a bed of morbid thoughts around the prospect of our death. Rather he is revealing the wisdom of attending in such a way to the mortality of our lives that we might live more richly and deeply against that backdrop; that we might live more richly and deeply by allowing ourselves to connect with the truth. Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return. We do this by stripping off the illusion that the fountain of youth is there in the medicine or cosmetic cabinet, in the fridge, or at the gym. Taking care of ourselves is certainly a Christian responsibility, but its purpose is to live more fully as God intended, not to kid ourselves that we will live forever. As is often said, all we really have is the present moment. The present does indeed gather into itself the wisdom of past experience and the joy of a future inspired by Christian hope. But all we really have is now, this moment, and how fortunate are we to have a faith that repeatedly reminds us of this. We are only now. But as Jesus tells us, he is "with us always" (Matthew 28:20). God is eternal. God's love for us is eternal. After our earthly death, we enter into life eternal. As Christians we believe, and look for, the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting, the life of the world to come.

St. Benedict, in his rule - which is as applicable to our ordinary everyday lives as it is to the lives of monks and nuns who live in monasteries - wasn't asking anyone to be morbid when he told them to keep death - their own death, no less - daily before their eyes. Rather, he was asking them - and us - to be wise: know our reality, cherish it, live it fruitfully right this minute, growing in our awareness that Christ is with us in this little here and now, making us ready, and through us making our world ready, for that day when "now" will open out into the "forever" we anticipate joyfully in our credal statements about the life everlasting.¹

The words of the Ash Wednesday service confront us, year in, year out, with what we have allowed ourselves to become, and prod us, year in, year out, to do better. These words call us to open our hearts anew to God and to God's word - in the hope that this time we will allow ourselves to become new as a result. It is about rising to our full, God-given stature.

In today's Gospel, we hear that Jesus, returning from the Jordan River where he had just been baptised, finds himself in the wilderness, where, we are told, for forty days and forty nights, he was tempted by the devil. In his humanity, Jesus might well have given up during this trial - he might have given in to the devil, or he might have simply walked away, returning to the relative ease of life back with his family in Nazareth. We are told he ate nothing during those days - he was famished, he was exhausted, he was without the support of other human beings. Time and again he was tempted by the devil - but Jesus stood firm. And it was the Spirit of God that sustained Jesus through these trials - for we are told, Jesus went into the desert "full of the Spirit". And it is the Spirit of God that will sustain us through difficult times of temptation. What those worldly temptations might be will be different for each of us. But the Spirit of God will protect us and keep us strong just as the Spirit of God kept Jesus strong in his many times of trial - in the wilderness and throughout his public ministry.

It is a discipline of prayer and reading Scripture that will grow the Spirit in us. So as Lent begins, let us commit in this season of preparation for Easter to undertake a daily spiritual discipline of

¹ Those parts of this sermon to do with the Rule of St Benedict draw on the 2014 reflection of Sr Genevieve Glen of the Abbey of St Walburga, "*Keep Death Daily Before Your Eyes: a November Reflection*". See walburgaoblates.blogspot.com/2014/11/keep-death-daily-before-your-eyes.html

prayer and contemplation, so that we too might greet the new fire of Easter overflowing with faith,
and hope and love.

+In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.