**Sermon: Ash Wednesday 2021**

Ps 51: 1-8, 2 Corinthians 5: 20–6: 10

Today we observe Ash Wednesday with the imposition of Ashes. Ashes have always been a sign of repentance, and examples of this can be found frequently in scripture. You may remember the sinful Ninevites responding to Jonah’s call to repent by putting on sackcloth and *sitting in ashes*. Can you imagine what you would look like after sitting in ashes?

Scripture also tells us that Job, after having endured his trials and tribulations, repents before God with dust and ashes. And that’s nothing compared to Jeremiah, who calls for Israel’s repentance by putting on sackcloth and *rolling in ashes*. Finally, Jesus reproaches certain cities for their lack of repentance, and their unwillingness to put on ashes and turn to God. Since the days of the early church, Christians have adopted this practice as a mark of penitence.

Ashes are burned. They are spent. They are black and grey, charred and useless.

Ashes are universal – all things, when put into a fire with enough heat, will turn to ashes.

Ashes remind us that all things are temporary in our world, including us. Next to taxes, it’s said that the only other certainty in life is that we will all, one day, become ashes… dust… our lives will be spent.

In the book of Genesis, God tells Adam, “Dust you are, and to dust you will return.” There’s no mixed message there. All human beings are given life, but in the same moment that we take our first breath, we get closer and closer to our last. “Remember… you are dust. And to dust you will return.” That’s humbling news.

There’s an episode of *The Simpsons* in which Homer is told by his doctor that he has only a few days to live. He is understandably frightened, but very soon after this dire pronouncement, he shows remarkable fortitude. Homer makes a list of all the things that he would like to do before he dies, and the list is full of things like ride in a blimp and chastise his boss. But the list also contains things like making amends with the neighbour from whom he’s always borrowing things but never returning. Homer also realizes that he has not the best father to his children. So, he spends quality time with his son, Bart, and listens to his daughter, Lisa, playing her saxophone one last time instead of telling her to stop with all that racket. This all might seem very trivial, especially since *The Simpsons* is nothing more than a cartoon. But I think there’s truth to the notion that when we come face to face with the temporary nature of life and the certainty of death, we immediately wonder if we’ve used this gift of life as God intended. We think of our sinfulness, and we know immediately that we have work to do before we die. Perhaps, over this past year of pandemic you may have had similar reflections.

I wonder though, how you (and I) would live if we knew that our days were numbered? Would you be more kind? More loving? Would you treat your friends differently? Your enemies? Would you make more time for family? Would you say, “I’m sorry” to the people that you’ve hurt? Would you be more mindful of suffering in the world? Would you want to share a little bit more of what you have with those who have nothing? What would you do? How would you live? What kinds of things would be on your list?

Death, sinfulness, repentance… these are the things that these ashes symbolise for us. Ash Wednesday reminds us first that we are dust, and to dust we will return. Life is fleeting. Time is short.

*And* the ashes remind us that we are fallen, and we can’t get up on our own. We need God’s help. We need God’s forgiveness and God’s grace. We need God’s love.

And that, is the hope that is usually smeared in ash on our foreheads; that God’s love has reached through our sinfulness - through the grim shadow of death - to the dust and the ashes of human life. We may be dust, but dust that is cherished and loved. As St Paul writes, *we are accounted dead… and yet terrifically alive. We have nothing, and yet by God’s love we have it all. Nothing in this world, even death, can separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ.* That is the secret scratched in ashes and imposed upon our foreheads. Nothing can separate you from God’s love. And although we cannot physical wear the ash this year, nothing – not even this pandemic – can take away God’s love for each and every one of us and his all-encompassing embrace as we return to him, seek his forgiveness, and humbly try to follow in the ways and values of his Kingdom as shown in the face of Jesus Christ.

As we journey through this Lent, let us try even harder to walk in the ways of Christ, and now, let us call to mind our sins and the infinite mercy of God, as we pray:

*The* **Litany of Penitence** *follows.*