During this year many of the Sunday Gospel readings are from Mark. Jesus’ first words in this Gospel appear about a third of the way through the first chapter. As He began His public ministry He said: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; REPENT, and believe in the gospel.” “…the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the gospel.”

The Greek word used for repent throughout the New Testament means to “change one’s mind.” Repentance is admitting that what God says is true and because it’s true to change our mind about our sins. The one thing that encourages us to repent and return to the Lord is the character of God. The reading from Joel speaks of God’s character. “Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love…. ” [2:13] It’s the character of God that ought to motivate us to repent, to seek His face and to believe the Gospel – the Good News about what Jesus has done for us.

Oswald Chambers wrote: “It is not repentance that saves me; repentance is the sign that I realize what God has done in Jesus Christ. The danger is to put the emphasis on the effect instead of the cause. Is it my obedience that puts me right with God? Never! I am put right with God because prior to all else, Christ died…. By the miracle of God’s grace I stand justified, not because of anything I have done, but because of what Jesus has done…. Sinful men and women can be changed into new creatures by the marvelous work of God in Christ Jesus.”

So what’s the significance of what we do here this evening when we receive ashes in the form of the cross on our forehead and hear the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” In a few minutes I’ll invite you to the
observance of a holy Lent with these words: “I invite you… in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.”

Lent is a time to be intentional about preparing to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the way in which God demonstrated His love for us by sending His Son into the world. How can we possibly begin to thank Him for what He has done? We can begin by having a cross of ashes drawn on our forehead, by confessing our sins, by seeking God’s mercy, by asking His forgiveness and by acknowledging Jesus’ presence in the bread and wine of the Holy Eucharist.

Ash Wednesday is the first day of the forty days of Lent. At the Church of the Redeemer we join with our fellow Anglicans and other Christians around the world in following the ancient practice of placing ashes on our foreheads. Putting ashes on our heads, as a sign of penitence, is a practice that we inherit from Jewish tradition. In Old Testament times, fast days expressed sorrow for sins and a desire to make atonement to God. Ashes are about repentance, sorrow and mourning. The King of Nineveh believed Jonah and he fasted forty days wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes to save the city and he ordered his people to join him. [Jonah 3:4-10] Jeremiah called Israel to “put on sackcloth, and roll in ashes” of repentance. [Jeremiah 6:26] Abraham spoke of being unworthy to talk with God because he was “but dust and ashes” [Genesis 18:27] – a man created from dust. And Jesus referred to ashes in Matthew 11:21[ESV], “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.”

The ashes of Ash Wednesday are a reminder of our unworthiness and sinfulness that corrupt and stain us and leads to death. They also remind us of our need of redemption – our need to be cleansed of sin and reconciled to God by
Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. Ashes also remind us of our common origin. The second chapter of Genesis says that we were created from the dust of the ground. Though we may spend our lives trying to distinguish ourselves from others, running after success and trying to feel different, the dust and ashes remind us that we’re all made of the same stuff. While ashes may signify and remind, they also invite. They invite us to repentance; they invite us to turn again to God and to receive new life. Isaiah brought glad tidings to the people of Israel, “to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning.” [61:3 RSV] Ashes are not the end but the beginning for they begin a season that moves us through silence, reflection, study, prayer and longing into Easter, a season of joy and resurrection.

We can’t appreciate God’s infinite mercy if we don’t realize that we need His mercy. We can’t understand salvation apart from our recognition of our need to be saved, to be rescued from something, namely from the sin that separates us from God. When we wear ashes on our forehead, we’re acknowledging the perfect and once for all sacrifice of Jesus on the cross who willingly gave His life and thus replaced the “offerings” made repeatedly by Old Testament priests to atone for the sins of their people.

The Letter to the Hebrews [10:1-10 ESV] expresses it like this: “For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices [these Old Testament sacrifices] there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.
Consequently [that’s a key word in this passage]…Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

‘Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body have you prepared for me;
in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.

Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,
as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’

When he said above, ‘You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings’ (these are offered according to the law), then [Jesus] added, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will.’ He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

“...we have been sanctified [made holy – set apart – you and I and all who believe] through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

As we begin this season of repentance and self-examination, we’re entering into a time of penitence and an opportunity to remember our mortality (symbolized by the ashes) and our sinfulness, but we’re also invited to prepare ourselves to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ (for every Eucharist is a mini-Easter). We have the additional opportunity this Lent to part of a small group to study together, but more importantly, to pray for one another and to encourage one another to grow more deeply in love with Jesus.

The reality is that apart from God we are simply “dust.” The Good News is that God has breathed into our dust, not only the breath of life, but also the breath of the Holy Spirit. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” You can’t see the ashes on your own forehead, but as you look at one another you’ll see not just ashes but the cross of Christ – the cross by which God reconciles us to Himself. Ashes are imposed in the shape of the cross to remind us of the
good news that is unfolding – the good news that delivers us from sin and grants us eternal life with God.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” As you hear these words, think not only about your need for repentance and the reality of your morality, but about the character of the God we worship and His invitation to draw near to Him through His beloved Son. David wrote in Psalm 103: “The LORD is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. He will not always accuse us, nor will he keep his anger for ever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our wickedness. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.” [8-11 BCP]

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Remember: “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” “Just as I am, without our plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, and that thus bidd’st me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.” So come this evening to receive the ashes of repentance and then to be fed at our Lord’s Table with “The Body of Christ, the bread of heaven” – “The Blood of Christ, the cup of salvation.” Come and draw near to the One who is your Redeemer, the Rock on which you stand. “O Lamb of God, I come, I come.” Amen.

Father Jack Potter+