

Sermon at Brecon Cathedral

Ash Wednesday 2015 at 11.00am

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Dean of Brecon

In the words of George Herbert: 'Welcome, deare feast of Lent', the season of spring, of new beginnings, of new life. Lent provides us with an opportunity to examine our relationship with God and the way in which we communicate with Him.

We tend to live our daily lives doing the same things over and over again, fulfilling the same duties, meeting the same people. We often work under great pressure, rushing to get things finished and breathlessly trying to cope. Whether we enjoy this pressure, and perhaps some of us do, or whether we hate it, the effect is the same. There will be no time to think, or to be creative, or to listen to what really matters. Without being aware of it, the time we devote to prayer and to God becomes irregular and perhaps non-existent. And even when we do manage to find some free time, we find it increasingly difficult to make the most of it; we are distracted or so exhausted, we sleep.

We are dominated by ourselves: by the thought of our responsibilities, our preoccupations with pettiness, and perhaps our importance. We may begin Lent weighed down by a sense of failure, disappointed with ourselves or with other people, or perhaps suffering from some regret or sorrow which tends to consume us. Every Ash Wednesday I go to my filing system where I have a file 'last will and testament'. It is a time when I review what I have. My key relationships and charities that will benefit from my death when I return to the dust. As my relationships change. As I indeed change allegiance of church as I have done this year, then my gifts to those who I leave needs to be changed, as I am changed. My friends think I'm morbid, but it is something practical I can do to review my life at the start of Lent, on Ash Wednesday. Reflect on my possessions, money and gifts, but more importantly a reflection on my relationships with family, friends, church and charities, because today is a call to remember we are dust, and to dust we shall return: turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ'.

Ash Wednesday is a day that draws us to the Church. Why do we come to the Cathedral to receive the mark of ashes? Ash Wednesday, always in the middle of the week, so most people will not have it on the radar. Why we would come to Church to be reminded of our mortality and to have ashes put on our foreheads? Perhaps, there is something about Ash Wednesday that speaks to our hearts about who we are and what time we have left on this mortal coil.

As we receive the trace of the sign of the cross on our foreheads with ash, we are reminded that we are, indeed, nothing but ashes, and that when we die, our bodies will not last, will not endure. We are united in understanding that certainty. In our focusing on mortality today we are accepting our need of God's grace to help us find meaning in this brief journey of life together

Yet, Ash Wednesday signifies to us also a beginning; the beginning of our journey with Christ to his death and to his resurrection. We enter this voyage marked with ash on the outside that signify what we are feeling on the inside. We are truly sorry for those things which we do that separate us from God and from one another. Knowing that we are united by Christ through his sacrifice, we offer our sins to God and promise anew that we will strive to live in response to this gift of incredible love. The ash give us a physical sign of an inner resolve.

At baptism the priest uses consecrated oil and makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the newly baptized and says, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." As we are sealed with ash on Ash Wednesday, we are reminded once again that we are Christ's own forever when we celebrate our Baptism on Easter day and we are sprinkled afresh with holy water as a reminder that in life and death, we belong to Christ. The sign of the cross is the sign of ownership, the mark of the one to whom we belong.

We will have come today for reasons known to us and God alone. But, perhaps we come because we need the assurance, and to remember, that we are united, one to another, through God's great love, and that we belong to Christ as we were sealed in our baptism. We need to be reminded of that. May it be our resolve and intention to keep Lent holy, and when we are reminded of the mark of the cross on our heads

today, we remember that first mark of Christ that assured us that we belong to him alone, and to him we will return.

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