

Ash Wednesday [1685] CCC & St. Barnabas

February 17, 2010 {1450R} St. Louis & Florissant

TEXT: Ash Wednesday Liturgy, Genesis 2:7

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"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

What chilling words! But what they say is the truth; they state an incontrovertible fact. We are headed for *dust* and metaphorically our bodies are nothing more than dust.

If that is all that can be said, life is painfully absurd. And then you die. Life has no meaning. Life has no worth. We can't even know who we truly are beyond being particles of dust held together by some kind of life force.

It is crucial, then, to know what that "life force" is, because if we can know that, we might know what it means to live and what is worthwhile about living. We might even find out who we really are.

Oddly enough, the clue to finding that life force is contained within these words about dust. Scientifically speaking, you know, we really aren't dust. We are made of atoms that make molecules that make cells that make tissues that make organs that make human beings. That is pretty exotic dust. To remember that we are *dust* is to remember where that particular understanding of who we are comes from. It comes from the second chapter of Genesis: "God formed man out of *dirt* from the ground..." In earlier translations, the Hebrew word for dirt was translated as dust. But that is just the beginning of the sentence. The rest of it reads, "[God] blew into his nostrils the breath of life. The Man came alive—a living soul!" God's breath—his Spirit—is the life force.

Try as I might, I cannot think of anything else that could be the life force that makes us what we are. Neither science nor philosophy has a better answer. We are *creatures of a Creator*. So whatever the Creator had in mind when he created us gives life meaning and worth and defines who we are.

Lent is a very good time to find out what God had in mind. Its emphasis on repentance—that is, its stress on turning our pilgrimage through life toward God—bids us to return to our roots in God's revelation. That is where we can discover what God had in mind when he created us. In the Bible—in the record of God's revelation—we can find out what life means, what is worthwhile about it, and who we truly are.

Not only that, God's revelation will give us what we need to know to turn away from the dehumanizing answers our world gives to questions about meaning, identity, and worth. The world's answers dehumanize us because the world does not want to acknowledge that we are creatures of a Creator. The earthly mind set tries to make us think that we are self-sufficient; that

we have the capacity on our own to make life mean something important, create our own identity, and decide for ourselves what is good, true, just, and beautiful. In other words, the world encourages to believe that we are our own god.

But we are not God. We are just dust. However, we are dust into whom God has blown his own breath—his own Spirit—to create a living creature he could love. Therefore, we *are* God's beloved children. His love gives us worth and defines for us what is worthwhile. Loving God by donating our lives to a relationship with him and with those whom God loves—namely our brother and sister human beings on this planet—gives meaning to our lives.

What I have just said about what life means, who we are, and what is worthwhile is only a cursory answer to those questions. If we were to read the Bible with those questions in mind we would have a good Lenten project or emphasis that would help us understand why God gave this dust ball of a human being the gift of his breath—his Spirit. Then when you are asked to "remember that you are dust," you will also remember *whose dust* you are.



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