

Homily for Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2010
St. Paul's Cathedral, San Diego, CA
The Rev. Canon Richard Lief

At a recent Cathedral staff meeting, we were looking at the Lenten calendar and I was surprised to notice that Ash Wednesday would mark my seventieth birthday.

Even though, I celebrate the fact that I have made it thus far, it is hard to imagine myself at this age. I still have a good measure of energy, still dance, and generally enjoy life. But reaching such a milestone does remind me of the ultimate fact of my mortality.

"A good time for you to preach!" remarked the Dean.

So, celebration, yes. But on this day we will hear these words as ashes are placed on our foreheads: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

The ashes are a sacramental sign. They are to be a sign of two things - our mortality and penitence.

As we reflect our mortality, listen to these familiar sentences from the Burial Office in our prayer book:

...we are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth we return. For so did you ordain when you created me, saying, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

What are we to say to these things?

Well, we aware that at various times during our lives, we are given a glimpse our destiny. It may be when we have to say 'goodbye' to a place where we have lived for long time or when we lose friend through death or misunderstanding. Or it could be when we lose a job or have the possibility of losing a job. Or it may be when we bring to a close a whole period of life. Certainly when we have a medical crisis, or when we approach old age. I know it is now Lent, but where does the Alleluia come in?

Close to four years ago I was diagnosed with a serious illness. I'm OK now. But while I waited for the results of the confirming tests and the subsequent planned surgery, I naturally thought of my own demise.

I remember that I was lying down in bed and contemplating the loss of everything and everybody. My feeling was one of being abandoned in a dark universe and not even knowing about it. Nothing, nowhere.

But, somehow as I was contemplating my own death, I had this strange sense of peace and acceptance. I was being given a special grace which came from outside myself.

I had turned to an article entitled "The Eternal Now" written by Paul Tillich over fifty years ago. I read the article in deep prayer.

And as I finished reading, I had a profound sense of connectedness with the universe, with eternity. What made sense to me was that we are in eternity now. Right here, right now. That we are made of the eternal, of eternal dust. That we are in the eternal both now and forever. And we are called to live in that perspective now. We are not alone. Whether live or die we are the Lord's. We are sealed in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.

I let go, surrendered, accepted my medical situation, and was at peace.

This penetrating experience was a gift. It was a gift of freedom that is available to us all. It is a freedom we can build on.

For with this gift, we are all free to be the precious people God has created us to be. We are free to truly love and be loved, and to see everyone on this planet as our brothers and sisters – hence to have our eyes open, our energies directed, to the issues of peace and justice. In other words, to be free to dance the Lord’s dance – to be a part of God’s action in the world. To live in the Eternal Now.

I’d like to share a modern parable with you. You might remember the last scene from the classic film *Zorba the Greek*. Zorba is this exuberant vagabond type of character who roams his world intriguing people with his devil may care view of life. Zorba has been hired as an assistant by a proper and very cautious young Englishman named Basil who is looking for meaning in his life. Basil is suspicious of Zorba, and yet at same time is intrigued by Zorba’s exuberance. Zorba often celebrates life by simply dancing in the midst of trouble.

In his flamboyant way, Zorba has convinced Basil that it would be a good investment to construct a long pulley to bring down cut logs from an equally long and steep hillside on the island of Crete. He says, once the logs are brought down, they can be taken to market. “And boss,” says Zorba, “then we can make a lot of money.” With the young man’s financial backing, the structure, with its several primitive towers, wires, and pulleys, is built.

As the logs begin to come down the mountain, they gain speed – too much speed - so much speed that the entire structure collapses in a domino fashion under the pressure of the increased momentum.

Even though there is some humor seeing all this happen, you can imagine how Basil feels, seeing the whole apparatus – his investment - collapse before his eyes.

What is the young man to do? Ironically, in the face of this disaster, he turns to Zorba and says, “Teach me to dance.” I have pondered this scene many times and have always come away intrigued, and in a mysterious way, I always have felt blessed. The young man lets go and enters into life. When we look at things this way, we are being invited to dance in the Eternal Now.

I mentioned at the beginning of this homily that the ashes on our foreheads are meant to remind not only of our mortality, but also of penitence. Penitence implies a sorrow over having missed the mark.

Ashes remind us that we often lose sight of the Eternal Now which pervades all things. We often lose sight of how precious we are, and how truly we are loved, by God. How often we lose sight of the joy of God’s dance.

In the Old Testament lesson, the prophet Joel is speaking to our ancestors who have lost sight of their relationship with the Eternal Now. He urgently calls for a solemn assembly. Gather everyone, he says, for invading armies are at our doorstep. Return to God, repent. To repent is to turn around, go a different direction, change, dance.

St. Paul picks up this point in his second letter to the Corinthians. “We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” Renew your relationship with the Eternal Now. Renew your relationship with the loving God who makes you a new creation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus - the Lord of the Dance.

In the Gospel reading, from Matthew, Jesus reminds his listeners of three ancient religious practices that can lead us back to the loving God, the Eternal Now. These are the practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. This is how we dance the Lord’s dance.

Jesus talks about these practices in a particular way. Don’t show off. Don’t pretend. Don’t be a hypocrite (the Greek term for an actor, unfortunately). If you practice them simply to receive praise from other folks who you

hope will applaud your piety, well, you might get what you ask for. But praise is here today and gone tomorrow. Hypocrites miss out on the joy of the Eternal Now.

And so in a few moments we will receive on our foreheads the sign of the cross with ashes. We will be reminded of our mortality and our need to turn back to God – to once again turn our attention to the Eternal Now. To God's holy dance.

So come with joy to the altar rail to receive the ashes. May they be for each of us, ashes of gladness.

This Lenten season, and throughout your life, give alms, offer prayers, and fast in the Eternal Now. For whether we live or die we are the Lord's. All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.