

## Called Out: The Ash Wednesday Message We All Need This Year

Readings: [Isaiah 58:1-12](#); [Matthew 6:1-6,16-21](#)

“Do not practice your piety in front of others.” Awkward! So here we are. We are Church that is what we do, right? We are Church. That is who we are. And never more than now. Why? Because “Church” in the original Greek of the Bible doesn’t mean Club-for-the-Holier-than-Thou or The-Only-People-God-Cares-About or The-Ones-Who-Get-It. No, Church in Greek, *Ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία), literally means “called out.” And I don’t know about you, but I definitely feel called out after that Gospel reading. Jesus does not mince words. “Don’t be hypocrites,” he warns. And if we take an unvarnished look at ourselves, we’ll know that he’s talking not only to us, but also *about* us. My mother explained it best when even as a child I noticed how weird it was that we smear ashes on our face the only day of the year we hear a specific injunction not to do that. Why? What is that about? She was so sweet, so patient with me. I remember she looked at me, and kind of paused for minute like “Who is this child?” and said, “Well, sweetie, it’s so that we don’t forget who we are.”

What’s going on in our Gospel is simple. Before it was used by Christians to mean “church,” the ancient Greeks used *Ekklesia* to mean a “popular voting assembly.” The Athenian *Ekklesia* formed the keystone of Greek democracy. To be part of the *Ekklesia* was to be a citizen: it meant you had voting rights; you had voice. Jesus is teaching us about what it means to be a citizen in God’s kingdom. If this sounds like political language, that’s because it is. Most of the terminology we now associate with Christianity has its origins in Roman military and political lingo. No joke.

“Gospel” – we all know that word – but did you know it comes from the Greek word “*Evangelion*?” It’s literally what Rome proclaimed as it went around conquering people. It said, “Oh look, all this good news. You are now conquered; peace has come to your land. You’re

welcome!” Of course, those on the receiving end of that “good news” didn’t always see it that way. People like Caesar Augustus who ended years of war in the empire, bringing about stability that hadn’t been seen, were hailed as “Savior” - “*Soter*” - long before that title was ever given to Jesus of Nazareth. One of the cool things about these material reminders of our ancient past – ashes, bread, wine, water, fire, oil – is that they make it difficult for us to forget who we are. Each one of them tells a specific and important story.

Our ashes don’t come from just anywhere – we make them each year from the palm branches of the prior year’s Palm Sunday service. That’s not a coincidence. Ash Wednesday begins Lent just as Palm Sunday begins Holy Week. Palm Sunday is modeled from the ancient Roman practice of Triumph, when a victorious general returned to Rome with the spoils of war, with gold and slaves, and marched through the center of the city. People greeted him in the streets with shouts of acclamation as trumpets announced his chariot, his face painted red like Jupiter Maximus, the God King toward whose temple he sped to make sacrifice. Some scholars believe a slave whispered in the general’s ear, “Remember you are mortal.” Forgetting is a problem, maybe even the central problem, of our human condition, and at its heart it’s the reason we sin, breaking faith with each other and with God.

Ash Wednesday can’t be appreciated apart from Palm Sunday, apart from that memory of an oppressed Israelite people gathered outside Jerusalem’s gates greeting Jesus with palm branches like a conquering King. They called him “Son of David” – a clear indication of what they expected him to do. Like Israel’s greatest King, Jesus was supposed to ride into town as a warrior hero and boot out their Roman occupiers. Jesus was supposed to Make Israel Great Again. They expected a Savior like Caesar to cast Caesar out. What they didn’t expect was that this Jesus, this Savior, wasn’t there to incite violence or even end a destructive regime. This Savior would insist that Israel’s greatness was not measured in her military success or in her nationalistic fervor, but

in her generosity, humility, and welcome to the stranger and outcast.

Called out. That is who we are. Once a year our misguided hosannas, offered to our false saviors, breaking God's heart, are gathered and incinerated, reduced to ash. We need to hear that this year. I wish our whole nation would participate in Ash Wednesday this year. Politician and pundits keep remarking that they can't remember a time when we have been more bitterly divided against each other. We block each other on Facebook, we yell at each other in the streets, and I even found out yesterday that a friend is calling off a wedding because of irreconcilable political differences. What? When did that happen? This is the world we live in, and the world God is calling us out of. We are in danger of forgetting.

We need those ashes pressed into our foreheads, in the shape of the same Cross Rome used to execute our Lord. Because that's the migration our hearts need to make right now. From the triumphant "Uh-uh" to the humble "Here I am." Jesus reminds us that God despises the self-righteous boasts of the hypocrite at prayer. He doesn't tell us in Matthew's gospel what that prayer sounded like, but he does in Luke: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." What would that sound like today? "God, I thank you that I am not like that Trump voter." "Thank you God that I'm not like those people who voted for Hillary." I've literally heard people say that. We are in serious danger of forgetting, forgetting the humanity we share, and the humanity we must extend even and especially to our enemies if we aspire to true greatness in God's kingdom. Alan Jones, the former dean of this cathedral, chides that "The problem with God is that He has no taste. He loves everybody."

Thank God for Ash Wednesday when God reminds us unequivocally: "No actually you are like each other. You are dust – all of you – and to dust you shall all return. If that isn't sobering, I don't know what it is. But...you were also made in Love and you are loved and you were

made for the sake of loving others.” Only by forgetting that it’s God’s breath in our lungs can we break faith with the will and love of our Creator, with each other and with this beautiful creation. That’s important too. Because honoring our shared humanity does not mean quietly acquiescing to injustice. God calls us to make no peace with oppression as our bishop is want to say. Indeed, on this Ash Wednesday another kind of ash drifts through my mind as I read the news of rising acts of antisemitism, and our new administrations intent to gut the EPA. I’m not sure which is worse: crematoria churning out clouds of violent hate, as white flakes covered Auschwitz - a haunting reminder of what it costs to fully forget - or the invisible carbon particles filling our skies that signal our apparent comfort with a suicidal wager we have made against ourselves. And that’s full on crazy.

Some might wish that this were a sermon about the president; but it’s not. It’s not about the president and it’s not about Hilary. It’s about us, about our tendency to invest our hope in passing things, and to treat each other as though we are passing things, when in reality we are people whose worth is measureless before God. We collude with our own self destruction in some surprising and creative ways. But the seeds of our destruction carry within them the very seeds of our salvation, too, and this is very good news. Jesus invites us to ask God, sincerely, for the good things God intends for us.

Rome was governed by a man who called himself the “Father of the Fatherland,” the “*Pater Patriae*” – one of the titles the emperor held. When Jesus teaches his followers to pray, “Our Father who are in heaven,” that was a way of saying, “the father in Rome who makes a total claim over your life, isn’t your real father and has no real claim over your life.” When we go to that other Father in secret, we are acting in a subversive way. That other Father doesn’t crave power – He has all power without condition. That Father doesn’t need to control, manipulate or denigrate. He loves, builds, creates. That Father gives that Father’s self. We see the image of the Father in the Son,

who even to the one who says “I hate you,” doesn’t turn away, who even from the Cross, proclaims, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Jesus invites us to ask that Father to restore us, to open our hearts to the needs of others around us. And, then, he invites us to use our creativity to achieve the will of that Father.

We may be dust, but what other dust gazes up at the night sky wondering where it came from? What other dust reaches out beyond its natural borders to foster healing and reconciliation even among another species? I’ve been on this Netflix kick lately, and I’m hooked into these nature specials. I’m so impressed with marine biologists and zoologists who every day dedicate their lives to studying the magnificent creatures that populate our planet. Men and women who spend their lives caring and protecting species not their own. We just think of this as a neat and normal thing, but it’s very unusual. It’s a great gift of our humanity to show concern for the whole creation. Last night at our cathedral’s Carnivale fundraiser, we beheld the spectacular art of Bandaloop. It’s amazing to imagine that someone looking at a wall would see it not as a barrier or an architectural feature, but a platform to dance on. How incredible? Who dance with such fluid movement you would believe you were in heaven. They looked like angels – it was so amazing! Or the kindness of the stranger I saw yesterday on Muni who paid for another woman’s ticket because she had lost hers. Our lives are full of potential for good. Full of potential to honor and to uplift the humanity we know we see in each other.

Now in this mortal time, we hear the invitation and open our hearts to receive it. Welcome to Lent. God in Jesus is calling us out. Out of our small orbits of self-interest into the endless circumference of His love. Out of our silly chasing after things that don’t satisfy, into the arms of a God who quenches our infinite thirst for affirmation. Out of the little castles we build around our hearts into the open palace of a true King. We, you are and I, are His daughters and sons, beloved heirs on this

incredible inheritance. You may be dust, but you are His dust and that makes all the difference. Let's make this dust count. Amen.