

1st Lent 2011

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Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. You may have heard those words this past Ash Wednesday service. This was the “formula” for signing with ashes for centuries, paraphrasing the word of God to Adam and Eve in the Garden.

I spent the past two days in New York City and I have to say that these words from Ash Wednesday kept coming into my mind.

Remember you are dust. That’s what I felt like in the midst of the sheer mass of humanity moving on the streets on NY. All I could think of was that I am really so insignificant, just like a speck of dust. Who am I among so many? How does God possibly hold in mind and heart each and every one of these persons? How could each speck of dust, each individual face and form be held in the mind and heart of God? How can the Creator be in touch, in tune, in time with each and every creature?

In the reading from Genesis we just heard, the second account of creation, God creates the human from the “clay” of the earth. This is a very anthropomorphic description of God who gets down and dirty in creating out of the clay or the “dust” of the earth. The

Spanish translation uses the word “polvo” which means dust. Perhaps the choice of words, dust over clay has something to do with creating “ex nihilo” out of nothing. Clay or mud has substance. Dust is so well, dusty, insignificant, nothing. It is not for nothing that we use the expression “to bite the dust” means to “die” (although in the case of Adam and Eve, to “bite the fruit of the tree in the garden” means “to die” . (My name is mud)

So why begin today’s homily with a dusting of images about death, temporal and spiritual “nothingness”? Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return! The first Sunday of Lent places us unapologetically in the midst of a created world that is at once beautiful, alluring and fraught with temptations and terrors. We all know that this seemingly benign, temptingly Edenic creation can turn hostile and transform itself into a destructive tsunami of sound and fury that washes away all in its path indiscriminately or an earthquake that pulverizes and turns into dust and ashes everything that can be swallowed up, people and places alike. In a moment the benign world of created things becomes hostile, even demonic. If we can believe our ears, in the beginning there was an idyllic, edenic state of equilibrium, a balance of all created things in relationship with the Creator. But then it all falls apart, disintegrates, decomposes. And here is the world as we know it,

sometimes bright and beautiful and sometimes inexplicably violent and destructive. And this is the world in which we live and the world in which Jesus lived: different threats, different disasters, different blessings, but the same world.

So how do we live with courage, with conviction, with confidence in this world filled with test and trial? What do we learn from today's lessons that begin this season of Lent with the original myth of sin and death?

If you were here for the 12:15 Mass you would have heard Father JA quoting from an Ash Wednesday homily of Fr Walter Burkhardt: I'd like to quote from him again: Remember that you are dust.

“Pretty grim, isn't it? Only if you stop there; only if you stop with the symbol that is dust. But that symbol is incomplete. When I dust your forehead, I dust with another symbol: the sign of the cross. And that symbol declares that dust has been redeemed. Redeemed not in the shadowy sense but with startling realism....And so, ever since Bethlehem and Calvary, this speck of humanity that is you, this is now “charged with the grandeur of God.” You are brothers and sisters of God-in-flesh. Your dust is literally electric with God's own life; your nothingness is filled

with God's eternity. Your nothingness has Christ's own shape.

And that is, I believe, the best way to walk and the best light to guide us. Jesus, our Way, Jesus our Light. The only way to live with courage and conviction as Christians in the face of a world that is blessed and broken is to be "re-formed" "re-modeled" in the image of Jesus Christ. This re-alignment is of course a process that is meant to happen throughout our lives but each Lenten season gives us the heightened sensitivity to our blessedness, our redemption and our brokenness.

So as we journey together in this Lenten season let us ask for the grace to be re-fashioned in the image of Jesus who is our Way, who is our Light.

