

Sermon Ash Wednesday 2025

We come to this service today and it greets us with a slap in the face. The worship Mother Church puts to us today is not the gentle, comforting, reassuring type. Religion which seeks only to affirm, which deals only in polite gentilities, which succumbs to the temptations of happy-ology and success *will not* find a home in today's worship. The writer of Ecclesiastes is right, however. *There is a time for every season under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die. A time to heal and a time to kill. A time to weep and a time to laugh. A time to mourn and a time to dance. A time to keep silence and a time to speak.* Mother Church can accommodate it all. But today. Today is the time for being real. Ash Wednesday we might think of as 'Get Real Wednesday.' Today the Church delivers a solemn call to drop the illusions. Today, Holy Church puts to the invitation to get real.

Firstly, this day invites us to get real about our deaths. At the imposition of ashes – the distinct feature of our worship today – we each hear the words, *Remember that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return.* You will know that our surrounding culture is mostly *unreal* about our deaths. It is either ignored or it is pushed to furthest recesses of our culture. It is never touched upon in 'polite' society. It is sanitised and medicalised, and removed from our ordinary existence. Where it appears in popular culture, it is mostly cloaked with horror, violence or the macabre, only giving us even more reason not to be real about it. In contrast, the Church does want us to be real about it. We will die. None of us – save the Lord's return - will be spared this. It is coming to us all. We are dust and to dust we shall return.

But recognising the truth of this is not to be depressive or morbid or morose. It is simply to be real! I had reason last week to say at a funeral here that it is certainly one of the blessings of faith that death can be approached realistically, hopefully, and in a spirit of peace, a spirit of calm resolve, a spirit of completeness. In this regard, the church speaks quite freely about the possibility of a 'happy death.' Something we should all hope for ourselves.

There is nothing quite like the prospect of death to help to clarify what is important. And this points us to the second thing this day calls us to. And that is for us to be real about how broken and imperfect we are. The litany sung at the start of our worship tonight puts it fair and square: we are miserable sinners.

Lent is of course an invitation to respond directly to that. Lent is a reminder that our sinful nature ought not define us. Through prayer, fasting and almsgiving we are given the tools to heal some of what so ails us. We ought to trust these as useful remedies because, as we hear in the gospel today, Our Lord himself commends them. I hope that in some measure all of us will seek to adopt something of these ancient disciplines. But even as we do, we will be reminded again of what we need to be real about. Of how strong the hold of the world the flesh and devil remain over us. In short, we are weak. We think we are in control. But in moments of honesty, of clarity, we know this to be far from the truth. And we might hope for a happy death. But even as we seek to grow in faith and virtue, we are reminded that we already live in death. That is what sin is. Sin kills the image of God within us. A hard thing indeed to be real about.

We will die. We are sinners. Which brings us to the final thing this day calls us to be real about: that God is our only help. It can be one of the serious temptations in this season before us to see it as some sort of spiritual boot camp or as a time for self-improvement. There can be a great temptation to strive to better ourselves through our own effort. But without wanting court fate, I can guarantee that every person here who has committed to a discipline of fasting will at some point fail. I can guarantee that every person here who commits to praying more or reading the bible more or taking up some other spiritual discipline, will not meet their own expectations. I can guarantee that every person here who commits to a charity or to some other good cause will be less generous and more stingy than they care to admit. In short, we overestimate our own capacities to make any real progress. Despite our best efforts and best intentions, we will come up short. And more so because we trust in *our* efforts, *our* capacities, *our* strength. But Ash Wednesday ends as it begins. *Remember you are dust.* We are nothing. Our efforts lead to nothing. We are nothing. Expect for God.

The real challenge of Lent is not to trust ourselves. Indeed, not to try and save ourselves. That is why so many of the spiritual gymnastics we attempt at this time end up falling short. They are an attempt to try and save ourselves. But today we are told: *Get real. Sorry, you can't save yourself.* And so that refrain, again from our Litany, is what should ring through our ears, and into hearts and lives: *have mercy on me. Have mercy on me...* Today, then, get real. We will die. We are sinners. And only God can save us. Get real about these, then the season before us can indeed be a season of grace. Get real about these, then today can indeed be the day of salvation. Amen.