



***+ In humility Lord may I prepare to receive you; grant me a small portion of your grace.***

Today is Ash Wednesday. It is the first day of the season of Lent. And in the Anglican Church across Australia we are in the preparation stage for HOPE25 which will run from Easter until Pentecost. St Barnabas College has had a fantastic head start to HOPE25 with our Festival of Hope in Theology and the Arts, however this is just the beginning. What will happen next will be a wonderful series of events and activities across Australia where the people share with the wider world the hope that we have in Jesus.

Lent is the perfect time to prepare for hope. Even though we live in hope every day this season calls us to be intentional about preparing for hope. Lent is where Christians make time and space to meet God through Jesus and in the Holy Spirit. It is where we make way for the events of Easter, for the hope that no human words can convey adequately – Christ is risen from the dead. But before we get there each year the season of Lent calls forth from us the discipline to pray, the effort to read the Bible, the energy to attend worship and engage in community. It is a very holy time.

Ash Wednesday reminds us of what it means to be mortal. The symbol of the ashes is a visible and tangible sign of being human. Mortal, you are dust; unto dust you shall return. These words will be spoken today as you are marked with the sign of the cross in ash. Perhaps the ashes will evoke memories of the dead for you. Very many more people are cremated now than buried. The ashes are all that remains of the physical body and like the body they return to the cosmic elements in the passage of time.

In 2009 I conducted my father's funeral on Ash Wednesday. It was a surreal experience, and it was set in Victoria in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires. As we travelled home from Maryborough in Central Victoria following the funeral we could still see and smell the smoke from the fires heavily in the air. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Mortal you are dust; unto dust you will return. Sixteen years later, just this January, I conducted the funeral of my father-in-law, this time in Brisbane – another surreal experience, different yet familiar. Unlike my father, Trigg's Dad was cremated. The urn reminded us of a mortality which was uncomfortable, too fresh. Mortal you are dust...



The reading from the prophet Joel sets a scene which evokes funereal memories for us. There is to be tangible repentance – fasting, mourning, weeping, rent clothing. This is the time to return to God, to turn around from the practices and way of life which do not honour God, which are destructive of self and others, which do not put God first.

And from Matthew's gospel we are called to question where and what is our true treasure, because in that place resides our heart. Let us pray that it is a godly place. The angle here is different than the prophet Joel. We are to conceal our repentance – not look miserable because we are self-sacrificing, we are to build a solid faith, a prayer base that will keep us strong. While Joel reflects the communal attitude, Matthew works on the personal. Both matter a lot when it comes to the business of why we do Lent, for why we are here today contemplating the ashes, our human state, our mortality. Mortal you are dust...

The corporate sin of humanity is massive, beyond our comprehension. The sin is so great that it took the sacrifice of the Son of God on the cross to effect salvation. Here is the hope that we seek. Here is the hope that we speak, that we long for, that we cherish. It is the hope of Easter Day, the bursting open of the tomb and the emergence of life again. This hope belongs to all of us, to those who do not know as much as to those who know. For this reason, we prepare for the season of HOPE25. Too many people have lost hope. They flounder and thrash in the dizzy complexities of our current age. They do not know God, even as they grapple for meaning, look for hope. Together we can proclaim hope in Jesus as the antidote for the emptiness of having no hope. Where is our treasure? Is it in the world or is in God? It takes huge courage to say our treasure rests in God, therefore there is our heart also. But we have hope.

Today on this Ash Wednesday we recall the ashes – the ashes of mortality and the ashes of repentance and turning back again to God, laying our sins and human weaknesses at the foot of the cross of Christ. The momentous road to Easter lies ahead for us and we are called to journey together with Jesus, through his trial and temptations, the suffering and betrayal, the giving up of his human life. We are called to lay aside our personal and temporary desires and needs and focus on God in rightful humility. The cross is on the horizon, hope is prescient, and we must make that journey through Lent before we experience the third day.