

A Sermon for Ash Wednesday, Year C  
February 21, 2007  
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## *Of Lent and Legacies.*

**E**ach year, I make my preparations for the Ash Wednesday liturgy by reading over the service in the Prayer Book. Whenever I come to page 265, to the Imposition of Ashes where, I pause. There, using the ashes of cremated palm fronds from the previous year's Palm Sunday service, I inscribe the sign of the cross on the foreheads of those who come forward, and say these words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Those words always remind me of certain other words that are always said near the end of Episcopal funerals. As the priest stands before the casket at the cemetery, these words of committal are said: "In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother, and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

And I remember that there is a connection between Ash Wednesday and funerals.

In the eighteen years that I have been ordained, I have officiated at more funerals than the average person probably attends in a lifetime. And when I deliver the funeral homily, I usually challenge the people attending with these words: "When your time on this earth has past, what will people say about *you*? What will be the legacy *you* leave behind?"

Funerals seem to be especially good times to ask those sorts of questions. For there, when we are dealing with the death of someone we know or care about, we seem to be able to clear away, at least for a time, the minutia of life – the things that distract us – and are able to have a few moments of clear self-evaluation. We can ask ourselves questions like: What *do* I want people to say about me? What legacy *do* I want to leave behind?

Ash Wednesday is an equally good time to ask these sorts of questions, for Ash Wednesday is a type of "little death." It is the day on which we embark on a forty-day period of self-evaluation and self-denial. It is a time of spiritual introspection. It is a time when we can look at ourselves honestly and, perhaps, begin the process of pruning the dead branches, the fruitless branches, the spoiled branches, from our lives. In short, it is a time when we are given the opportunity to make certain choices about the direction our lives will take from here on out.

There is a quote – I'll call it a "vision statement" – credited, in my sources, to James S. Hewitt, that I want to recall for you in part. It is worth considering.

*People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered. Love them anyway.  
Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.  
The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.  
What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.*

We have it within our powers to choose the things we will do. We have it within our powers to determine the accomplishments of our life. What will they be?

When I was in freshman sociology, the professor expressed his wish that, upon his headstone, these words would be inscribed: “He listened.” I heard about a Christian teacher and preacher, whose hero in the faith was his father, who had inscribed upon his father’s headstone: “He prayed.” I can’t help but wonder what words others will have inscribed upon my headstone – either literally or figuratively. Will those inscribed words state that I was loving to those near me, or difficult to be around? Will those words state that I was honest and vulnerable, or evasive and defensive? Will those words describe me as compassionate and giving, or as selfish? Was I a peacemaker or a troublemaker? Was I a builder, or a destroyer?

Lent gives us the opportunity to begin thinking about things like James Hewitt’s vision statement and inscribed headstones. Lent gives us the opportunity to begin considering what mark we would like to make upon our families and friends and co-workers. Lent gives us the opportunity, if need be, to make a new beginning of our life.

I would like to offer to each of you, today, a prayer. It is the Prayer of Saint Francis. If you wish – and I hope you will – let it be your Lenten prayer. Let it be the prayer you say daily. Let it be the prayer whose expressed hopes you try to realize in your life when these forty days are past. Let it be your resurrection prayer, your Easter prayer. And so, let us pray:

*Lord,*  
*make me an instrument of your peace.*  
*Where there is hatred, let me sow love;*  
*where there is injury, pardon;*  
*where there is doubt, faith;*  
*where there is despair, hope;*  
*where there is darkness, light;*  
*and where there is sadness, joy.*  
*O divine Master,*  
*grant that I may not so much seek*  
*to be consoled as to console;*  
*to be understood as to understand;*  
*to be loved as to love.*  
*For it is in giving that we receive;*  
*it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;*  
*and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*  
*Amen.*