

Ash Wednesday
25 February 2009
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

There is lead ash in the ice on Greenland. The presence of lead there is three hundred percent more than one would expect naturally to find. It's a curious reality as well as a dangerous one. For the longest time scientists were perplexed by the ash, and it was assumed that it would forever be among the earth's unsolved geologic mysteries. However the lead became trapped in the ice, it will surely now be there forever.

We want to live forever. Oh, there are some of us who will deny it. But our desire is betrayed by the ways in which we live our lives. Both personally and corporately, we create things that will outlast us—like monuments, skyscrapers, museums, and one hundred twenty-year-old churches. We put our names on memorials, scholarships, events, and buildings. We amass (or try to amass) fortunes that will continue to live through our descendents, almost as if through their inheritance a piece of *us* will continue living.

As a gift to the future, none of these is bad, and in fact they can all do immeasurable good. But we must also acknowledge the uglier underside of our striving for immortality. In addition to leaving testimonials to future generations, we also leave a darker legacy. With our pretensions to immortality we act toward one another and toward the good earth as if there are no consequences, as if we—like little gods—can do what we will and start each day afresh. As the current economic morass has so painfully revealed, we live unsustainably in every way. We eat up our financial resources, our human resources, and our environmental resources, leaving proverbial ash where once life was vibrant.

Sadly, it is our negative legacies that most closely approach immortality. Long after anything explicitly connected with any of us is gone, the lingering effects of our regular and casual misuse of our world will live on to affect generations who may remember nothing of us but our shame.

The desire to live forever is not new. Throughout the broad scope of human history, people have coveted immortality, and then, as now, they enacted their pretensions by living as though there lives bore no consequences. You see, we now know why there is lead ash on Greenland. Some years ago enterprising scientists paid attention to the geologic strata where the ash is found and were able to date it to a period around the first century before Christ, a time when Roman entrepreneurs discovered silver and gold in the hills of Spain. Without thought of

consequence, the Romans built giant, hell-like furnaces to smelt those precious metals. Ancient writers talk of clouds of ash that could be seen for miles, of birds that would drop dead from the sky when traveling near it, of forty thousand slaves condemned to work around and breathe in leaded poison, all so that the Romans might adorn themselves in silver and gold to resemble the gods.¹ That lead, emitted into the air on what scientists call “a hemispheric scale,”² wafted northward until it was trapped in Greenland’s icepack, a deadly gift left us by the Romans, a deadly form of immortality.

This is Ash Wednesday, and the very intention of this day is to be *a reminder of our mortality*. In a few moments, we will each have ash smudged on our foreheads with the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” We will recall how all the endeavors in which we place so much effort and devotion in this life—monuments, inheritances, even august church buildings—will, like us, eventually crumble into dust.

But just as importantly we will also remember the ash we leave behind. I pray we will dwell upon the ways in which our worst legacies threaten to overshadow our best. As but one example, consider that the same deadly lead trapped in Greenland’s ice through the actions of the Romans two thousand years ago may soon melt into our oceans through actions of our own.³

Of course, the great irony is that we *do* enjoy true immortality. With and in God, our promise *is* that we *will* live forever. Were we to lay our unspoken anxieties and fears about death at the feet of the God who gives life, we might find that we could tread in this life more lightly.

We might discover the light of the immortal God that shines in all people, and we might then treat our brothers and sisters differently, both those we know personally and those masses we don’t know and are as yet unborn who nevertheless are often on the receiving end of our decisions.

We might recognize the goodness that God declares in his creation and *cherish* it rather than use it and use it up.

If we believed God’s promise—that we will abide with him always—then perhaps we would live for *his* immortal glory instead of striving for our own.

Amen.

¹ Holland, Tom. *Rubicon: The Last Years of the Roman Republic*, pg. 41.

² <http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/abstract/265/5180/1841>

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/08/science/earth/08gree.html>