



ASH WEDNESDAY

March 6, 2019

SCRIPTURE READING - LUKE 16:19-31

¹⁹ There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' ²⁵ But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' ²⁷ And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' ²⁹ But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' ³⁰ And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' ³¹ He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'

REFLECTION

The English pastor and poet John Donne said that death makes us all equal, and in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man this is what Jesus is getting at. Though both began on separate ground, with one higher than the other in luxury, in death they are placed on level ground stripped of the things that made them rich and poor. And when it comes to Ash Wednesday it is very much like the parable, for though we do not literally die we are reminded that death makes us all equal. While receiving the ashes, once lush green branches that we waved on Palm Sunday, the pastor or priest tells us these words:

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

It does not matter if we are clothed and well-fed like the rich man, and it does not matter if we are living with dogs and begging for crumbs like Lazarus. We are all equally told that death will one day come to us, and for a moment we are stripped bare and stand as naked souls in the presence of God. But this stripping must go beyond the sanctuaries we will visit today, and it must also go beyond these forty days of fasting called Lent. We must daily allow ourselves to be stripped by the truth that we are dust and allow this truth to shape our lives and place us on level ground with others.

When we truly remember that death is what we have in common with all people, we can avoid the mistake of the rich man in the parable we have read today. Instead of staying on our "higher ground" we can give it up with humility and step down to embrace those like Lazarus with the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

O God, Who made us from the dust and says we shall return to it, we thank You for another Lenten season and the joys of Easter it leads us to. As we receive the ashes today may we not see them as a "holy mark", and may we not use them to give a message to the world that we are somehow "higher" or "better" than others. Lord, on this Ash Wednesday, strip away our finery and humble us, and bring us down to level ground with all people that we might embrace them with grace and love. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen