

Ash Wednesday

You may know the ancient Egyptian myth about a bird which regenerates itself by burning itself up. The phoenix literally sacrifices itself: it carefully builds a nest, settles down in it, and then bursts into flame. From the ashes left after the flames have done their work - emerges a beautiful, magnificent reborn bird. In the myth, the bird knows it has to die, so that a new bird can be created in its place. Not only must it die, but it must also be burned until nothing is left of it but ashes. The phoenix is a wonderful image for us to hold before us today on this Ash Wednesday.

Ash Wednesday offers us a chance of dying into a new birth. Not literally dying, but allowing all the things that get in the way of our spiritual life to fall away – to turn to ash. The liturgy reminds us of our humble beginnings. It asks that we bring to God all those things that hold us back from being all that we are called to be in God's image. In this liturgy today, we don't have a literal burning fire to plunge into, but a litany that takes us into a ritual of penitence. Taken seriously, this ritual helps us start to burn away all the things which prevent us from feeling God's love and from being who we were created to be. Like the phoenix, we are called to put our entire life into the nest.

Ash Wednesday calls us to inspect our lives. We are to look at how we treat one another. We are to look at how we care for the earth. We are to look at our relationship with God. And, according to Jesus, we are to do this quietly and unobtrusively, without any fanfare. And so on Ash Wednesday, we take a close look at our lives and we willingly put them into the nest of Lent, that lets them be burnt up. In Lent, we allow our fasts, our rituals, our prayers, and our studies to clean and burn away all the things that prevent us from growing in Christ.

In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus tells us not to store up treasures on this earth. What better imagery could we have than to let our 'treasures' the things we hold onto, be burnt away: the hurts and grudges we bear against one another, the anger we allow to simmer away under our false smiles, the rumors we allow to go round and round, the finger-pointing we participate in, the inability to love ourselves and each other with forgiveness. We often hold onto these things, treasuring the pain they

bring to our lives. These treasures are powerful, and they give us an artificial sense of importance and control. We hold onto them because we are afraid of what might happen if we give them up.

Perhaps we need to 'fast' from these things - give them up for Lent. I don't know what you've been thinking of fasting from in the coming weeks - the traditions of course, are red wine and chocolate, or the little luxuries we indulge in. But Isaiah suggests that we should 'fast from pointing the finger.' Fast from all of those things that we hold onto for our protection. The Epistle reading tells the people of Corinthian to be reconciled to God. We, too, need to reconcile ourselves to God. But the place to begin is to reconcile ourselves with one another. We need to fast. We need to refrain from indulging in rumors and hurtful actions. We need to break our habits of shaming and judging one another. These behaviors get in the way of our being able to focus on God's love for us. They get in the way of our reconciling with one another. The words of today's service help us to begin the process, by providing a place for confession and forgiveness. We are encouraged to forgive ourselves, to forgive one another, and to accept God's forgiveness in our lives.

When we forgive ourselves and others, when we let go of anger and self-pity, we find a new freedom. We find new energy to concentrate on feeding those who hunger for compassion and understanding. Jesus modeled this kind of leadership. He fed the hungry, loved and cared for the sinner and the outcast, and showed great compassion for all people.

It takes courage to walk this path in the coming weeks. Yet, we can do it, because we know that we will rise at Easter with Jesus, the risen Christ, new and magnificent. We know that Easter lies ahead of us. This doesn't make the introspection of the time any easier for most of us. Knowing that Easter follows Lent does, however, add faith and courage to our exploration of self and God in the coming weeks.

The phoenix knew that in order to survive it would have to die so that it could find new life. This paradox lies at the heart of our Baptism, Ash Wednesday, Lent, and Easter. May we enter this time of Lent, this somber time of reflection with committed hearts; committed to the journey of a deeper relationship with God and with each other.

To take the sign of the cross
means to allow oneself to be stretched out wide
in solidarity with the Christ
and in compassion for all,
even at cost,
and to believe against defeat and despair
that hope can rise and life begin again.