

Ash Wednesday
March 5, 2025

Rev. David A. Kind
University Lutheran Chapel
Minneapolis, Minnesota

+ Jesu juva +

MEMENTO

II Peter 1:2-11; Matthew 6:16-21

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Jesus prayed to His Father on the night He was betrayed, and said concerning His disciples: “they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one.” He later said, “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word.” So it is for all of us that Jesus prayed this. We live in the world but we are not of the world. This theme runs throughout the Christian’s life as we strive to live faithfully in this life as the children of God, as people on pilgrimage who look forward to arriving at their Father’s land and into His home.

This theme is brought home to us tonight as we are very pointedly reminded that our time in this world is very short. For we are dust and to dust we must return. It is a theme that is often seen on epitaphs on the walls of ancient churches: “*memento mori*” that is, “remember, you will die.” Like the sign of ashes, the *memento mori*, whether spoken on Ash Wednesday or engraved on the wall of a tomb, is both a statement of warning and of hope - hope in that your time of waiting, your time of pilgrimage, is short; warning in that if you make your life here, rooted in this world, your time is short.

Jesus speaks tonight in the reading from the Holy Gospel against worldliness, and addresses two ways in which it manifests itself. The second of these ways is rather easy to see and to grasp: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” What you gain on earth is fleeting. It is easily lost. Moth, rust, thieves - all symbols of the fleeting nature of this world’s possessions. Deterioration, loss, and ultimately your death will deprive you of that which you have here. If you set your heart on this world, this mortal life, this world will not just break it, but will consume it. And you, being earthbound will be pass away with the earth. For you will have neglected the greater life set before you, the greater treasures prepared for you in Christ Jesus.

Long ago, the Christian author, Lactantius, an advisor to the Emperor Constantine, lamented the state of those whose hearts were bent on earthly things: "O souls bent toward the earth and devoid of heavenly things! Rather, look up to the heavens, to the sight of which God your Creator has called you. He gave you an upright countenance; yet you bend toward the earth. You, with lofty minds and bodies raised toward your parent, cast yourselves down to lower things, as if you regret not being born quadrupeds. It is not right for a heavenly being to be equated with earthly and downward-looking creatures. Why, bereft of heavenly blessings, do you willingly bow down to the ground? Miserable ones, you wallow in the dust when you seek below what you should have sought above."

The end of this earthward bent, this setting of one's heart on earthly treasures, is death. The answer, then is to set your heart on the heavenly, the end of which is eternal life through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The first thing Jesus addresses tonight, however, deals precisely with those who appear to have their mind set on heavenly things, who are religious, who fast and pray to God. But in reality, our Lord says, they are hypocrites and are not actually heavenly focused, but are still bending themselves to the earth. Jesus says, "when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward." The issue put before you here is the question: Who do you wish to impress? Who do you wish to please? Are you acting in devotion to God or are you seeking the approval of men? And here the worldliness is in a sense worse than the ordinary worldliness, for one claims to be devoted to God while really being every bit as worldly as those who have set their hearts on earthly power, possessions and the like. And these, Jesus says, receive their reward. They appear pious before men, they perhaps gain the respect of holy men, the admiration of their church, perhaps even a certain grudging respect from unbelievers who see their devotedness. But what does God see? Is He pleased with this? No He is not. Again, we must be unconcerned with how we appear before other people, and turn our eyes heavenward seeking to be found pleasing to God.

So what pleases Him? Ashes? God does not need your ashes. He does not need your fasting. He does not need your works of charity or your alms or your prayers or your sacrifices or your devotional acts, even those imposed upon your forehead by His servant. These things are not done for God, as if He benefited somehow from them; they are done because they are good for you. They are done to turn your heart away from the earth and its treasures, to lift your countenance from the ground so that you might look upward again.

What pleases God, rather, is that you do just that; that you turn away from the earthly and look to Him in faith. What He wants is for you to find your treasure in His Son. He wants you to look to Jesus, and in Jesus to give you every good and every precious gift. He wants to forgive your sins. He wants to possess

you as His own in love and fill you with His Spirit. He wants to shower you with the blessings of heaven and welcome you to His home, both here in His Church, and at the end of your earthly pilgrimage. As St. Peter says, "His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world..." He wants to draw you upward, to give you the dignity of heavenly beings, to give you beyond even what the angels enjoy: to partake of His own divine nature through union with Christ Jesus.

Memento mori, Remember that you are dust. But remember also that you, by the grace of Christ you are no longer of the world. By the holy birth of baptism, by faith in Jesus, you are heavenly. Lift up your hearts! Lift up your faces! *Memento vivere*! In penitent faith, and marked by the cross of Christ, remember that you will live!

+ Soli Deo gloria +