

Quality Dust

Ash Wednesday

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, March 5, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Every December, the Office gets a package from the Church Pension Group containing giant-sized version of the liturgical calendar that we provide for the Altar Guild and others to keep us all straight with the dates for Easter (April 20) and what day of the week Christmas falls this year (it's a Thursday). In addition to all that information of sometimes dubious importance, the jumbo calendar includes another unique feature: at the top of each month of the CPG calendar is a cartoon by priest and artist Jay Sidebotham purporting to give a glimpse of life at the mythical St. Swithin's Parish.

The one for this month is clever, John the Baptist being asked by a very proper looking gentleman to tone down his rhetoric, lest it adversely affect the pledge campaign. My favorite, however, is from Lent a few years ago. In *it*, we see a young priest, dressed in alb and cincture, her blond hair cut in a stylish pageboy, holding a container of ashes, her smudged thumb ready to apply ashes to a penitent who is kneeling at the altar rail, impeccably dressed in tan slacks, white shirt, red tie, and blue blazer. Parishioner and priest both have a pious, if a bit prideful, nose upturned look on their cartoon faces, as the priest intones the familiar blessing, "Remember that you are dust..." But rather than continue with the Prayer Book version we will all hear here in a few moments, "...and to dust you shall return," the cartoon priest adds, "...a very good *quality* sort of dust..."

As with most good humor, I think I have remembered this cartoon so well over the years because there's a kernel of truth represented in its colorful tableau. Whether or not it is well deserved, we Episcopalians have a reputation for considering ourselves perhaps a higher stratus of Christian, perhaps just a cut above the *hoi polloi*, perhaps a better quality sort of dust... than most.

As we come together this [afternoon] [evening] on Ash Wednesday, here at the very beginning of our Lenten season of reflection and self-examination and preparation, with our readings and our purple and our starkly adorned Altar, we quite deliberately look at the fallings and the failings of our lives, we quite deliberately remind ourselves that we are made, after all, of earthy stuff. This [afternoon] [evening], though, with the young priest at St. Swithen's, I want to remind us *all* that we really are "a very good *quality* sort of dust."

Oh, not for the reasons poked at by the cartoonist. Regardless of our beautiful vestments, our coiffure, manicure and pedicure, our slacks-tie-and-blazer fashion sense, like every other human creature since the first, at the dawn of creation we were formed of the dust of the earth. But then our Creator somehow formed that dust into his own image. For the sake of love alone, he breathed his own life into that bit of dust. To call us back from our disregard for his love, the eternal maker of all things, the eternal molder of dust, took our earthy nature upon *himself*. And in *his* name, and with *his* grace, and by *his* power, we have, each *one* of us, been declared "a very good quality sort of dust" with the splash of water and the cross of oil that sealed us as Christ's own forever.

"Create and make in us new and contrite hearts," we said a few moments ago in our prayer for this evening, knowing that the Lord of all creation, the Lord of all our lives, will once again look at the dust that we are, and see *in* us the good quality of his own love.

Thanks be to God.