

HOMILY ASH WED 2012

Our parishes have a long, rich, complicated history. HT, founded in 1842, is the oldest parish in the diocese. While XII, technically speaking, is the newest, it has a prehistory of sorts, inasmuch as there was a church of the same name erected around 1870. A student of ecclesiastical history can find much in the archives of a place such as this: a well worn missal printed in the Latin language, reports of homilies preached in the native tongue of newly arrived German immigrants, a photo taken on dedication day showing stern clerics clad in cassocks and birettas surrounded by a faithful flock clothed in the formal attire of a much more conservative and proper era in fashion than our own. Yes, there's plenty of Catholic history to be found in northern Platte County--much to the surprise of our neighbors in St. Joseph, Kansas City, and Leavenworth. But however much of the past rests secure in our chronicles, much, much more has been irretrievably lost. Many of the faces in photos and names in records are unrecognizable to us now. And even when the data are identifiable, we are granted only fragmentary insights into an entire era that has passed on. What our spiritual ancestors thought, felt, suffered and celebrated, their joys, sorrows, struggles and triumphs are no longer accessible to us. At best we can imagine, surmise, and sympathize, trying to interpret the experience of our predecessors in terms of our own limited knowledge. If only the stones and statues of this church could talk and tell what they have seen and heard, but, alas, they guard their secrets well.

Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. So it has been with the generations who preceded us here; so shall it be some future day for us. We emerge from nothingness, are born, grow, then decline and finally die, returning to the void from which we came. It's as if the whole human race, from Adam through the last man, marches forward in a long somber Ash Wednesday procession, to receive the ashes which symbolize his finitude: no one is excluded--the old and young, the healthy and ill, the rich and poor. Everyone anointed w/ the dark seal bears the mark of mortality and must heed the words: remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Repent and believe in the Gospel. That is the other imperative we hear this day. Were this observance a mere recollection of the facts of life and death as they are universally recognized, there would be little point in it. We would do better to eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. The gospel which inspires this sacred ritual makes the crucial difference, at least for those who believe it. We come to this temple in response to Paul's admonition in the 2nd reading--be reconciled to God! Our reception of ashes is part of a much larger liturgical whole. We receive the ashes for we know that we shall die and return to dust. We also receive them because we know we are sinners, that is in fact the reason for our common death sentence. Most importantly, we receive them because we know the command to repent and believe contains a promise filled with wonderful hope. Hope in a God who loves us so much that he made his only Son who did not know sin to be sin, precisely so that we might become the righteousness of God

thru faith-filled repentance. In other words, Jesus, God's only Son, the innocent Lamb of God w/o taint of sin, took upon himself the penalty for sin by suffering death, so that sinners who believe in him might gain forgiveness and eternal life.