



Homily for 3/6/2019

Ash Wednesday

Rev. J. David Carter, JCL

*Have Mercy On Me, O God*

Ash Wednesday is not a holy day of obligation. There is no precept or rule that binds people to come to Church on this day. And yet attendance on Ash Wednesday rivals Christmas and Easter and puts to great shame the small crowds on other actual holy days of obligations. Why? I think it is because we can all resonate with the agony of sin and death. They are real, and we cannot hide very long from facing this reality if we want to live in the truth. “Remember, man, you are dust and unto dust you shall return.” Ash Wednesday is the reality check that we all know we need. It is also a glance at the great mystery of evil and its child, death, that we all must face. Tonight, when we receive ashes the choir will be singing an ancient setting of an even more ancient psalm. They will sing Psalm 51 - known as the *Miserere mei, Deus* (Have mercy on me, God) in Latin. This is David’s Psalm to the Lord after he has done a grave evil. The backstory is that he, the king, had grown comfortable with being King and had begun to shirk his duties. At the time when king’s go off to war, David remains behind in Jerusalem. There he spies Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, on the roof, and calls her to the palace where he falls into the sin of adultery. When she becomes pregnant, he arranges for the death of her husband, thus becoming a murderer. He is confronted by the prophet Nathan, and his sin is exposed. The child is born, falls ill and then eventually dies. Imagine the shame, the sorrow, the agony and the guilt of David! All of these very real emotions are captured in the text he writes afterwards that become the famous song that the Church sings today and every Friday of the year. Every soul can take up its theme: We have sinned. We are guilty. We have been humbled by our weakness. The medieval composer Gregorio Allegri set this Psalm to music, and in this music he captured the cry of anguish, the remorsefulness and sorrow. But he also reveals the hope that David and the Church have in a merciful God.

Today, as you approach the altar rail and kneel down to receive these ashes as a sign of repentance and sorrow for sin, see them also as the symbol of our hope. Let the wail of sorrow be yours, but let the solace of humble submission be yours also. When we admit our guilt and beseech the Lord, we find His mercy. These ashes are a declaration of war against sin. It says, sin and sin’s child, death, will not have the final word in my heart. Let us humbly submit to the Lord. A humble and contrite heart he will not spurn.