

There appears to be a bit of irony and paradox in the gospel reading the Church chooses for Ash Wednesday and in what we are going to do at this liturgy: Smudge ashes over our forehead!

What Jesus was speaking about concerned a religion caught up in externals. They would smudge themselves with ashes, for others to see, but made no change in how they were living. This, no doubt, may still be the case for some.

Jesus would say to us today: If you are truly committed to *ongoing conversion within yourselves*, then wear the ashes as a reminder to *yourself to do so*.

And so we start of the 40 days of Lent with ashes being placed on our to the words: "Remember you are dust and to dust you will return." Again, as we look at the ashes (dust) on our foreheads, it is a **reminder** to us that we **are mortal beings** and our bodies will become dust when buried and ashes if cremated - our life-span is unpredictable.

In other words, "If I die tomorrow, will I be fit for the Kingdom?" The Church ask that we might take on this mindset and examine our lives in light of that final day. If we knew, would we live today differently than yesterday? Would some of the things we obsess about really be all that important?

Lent prepares us to focus on what is truly of consequence in what we say and do and how we live our lives.

+I read an interesting illustration of this during Advent from a pamphlet called *The Little Blue Book*. A priest was leading a retreat for a group of priests. On the last night together they held an open session concerning a variety of issues - it was rather lively and did not end until well after mid-night. Eventually they drifted off to their rooms one by one.

During the night a priest named Fr. Bill died in his sleep. He was 63 years old and had been very involved in the retreat. A lively and intelligent man who was at one time a rector of a local seminary. He was pretty well known by all the priests who had gathered for the retreat and yet no one knew he had died.

The next morning they all had breakfast and celebrated morning prayer. On their way to the various events, many of them walked back and forth past his room, unaware he was in there, dead.

At the closing of the conference, the speaker talked about the issues they had discussed the night before. He then challenged them to see all of these issues in the larger context of the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps during Lent that is something for us to think about, as well? What are some of the things you have argued about? Things you may have obsessed over? Whatever the case, take what you might deem important and then place it with the backdrop of the Kingdom of God - is it really all that vital, in the end?

Just think back to issues that were so important in grade school. and how silly they would have been to you in High School. We could then take the issues of High School and place it against college and just keep going from there. Does what you worried about back when an issue today?

Looking back we smile, we can smile and realize that these were important then but hardly important now. I suspect the Lord smiles as we make them so important, much as we smile looking back to grade school.

While the priest was presenting the issues of the day, unbeknown to any of them, Fr. Bill was lying dead in his bed.

He went on to say to the priests that there are two ways to deal with issues that concern everyone:

1. One way is not to care about anything, and that is the wrong way.
2. The second is to be in touch with the great mystery of God, to experience first-hand the breadth and depth of the magnificent reality that the whole universe cannot hold.

During Lent, think of those concerns within the great mystery of God - everyday, ask yourselves that in light of your mortality and that of the Kingdom of God.

They ended the retreat with Mass, followed by lunch. Then all went out to their "**earthly homes**" and Fr. Bill was the only one who really went **home home**. (There he discovered all that really mattered in life.) They still did not know he had died. It was only the next day that someone found his body in his room.

Since Fr. Bill's death, the priest said that when he gave priests' retreats, he imagined one of the priests dead in his room. It made him understand how temporary and passing all our contemporary concerns really are.

Yes, wear those ashes today and "*Remember you are dust and to dust you will return*" - mortal beings in hope of the Kingdom of God.