

A Homily for Ash Wednesday

Colleagues,

Here is Jerry Burce's homily for the beginning of Lent in the year of our Lord 2011. Jerry is a member of the pastoral staff at Messiah Lutheran Church, Fairview Park, Ohio.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

A Homily for Ash Wednesday on 2 Corinthians 5:20-21

"So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

In Nomine Jesu

What a bitter thing we are about to hear. Dust you are. To dust you shall return. It means what you think it means. We are going to die. No ifs, ands or buts. A child in kindergarten got the message in our service here this morning. She began to cry, and there was terror in her cry. My heart bled for her, but there was nothing I could do. The word stands. We who fear God, or try to, are not allowed to hide it.

We are going to die because God says we have to. He insists on it, in fact. He insists on it because he knows us too well. He knows that we cannot and will not quit with our sinning. We will always second guess him. We will always presume to know better than he does. We will never love him with all our heart, our

soul, our strength, our mind. We will never love our neighbors the way we love ourselves. We don't know how to. We frankly don't want to. And so we must die.

There is a strange mercy at work here, a mercy not soft, but hard and cutting like a diamond. In his mercy, God refuses to inflict me on the rest of you forever.

In his mercy, God refuses to let THIS sinner continue thinking that HE rules.

In his mercy, God insists that there be at length an end to my sinning. He insists on this also for his own sake. He above all deserves a Sabbath break from me and my ways. Therefore, in God's mercy, I must die.

This is a mercy of God that I frankly hate with all my heart. You hate it too-at least as it applies to you, and to such other sinners as you more or less treasure.

Of course my hatred and yours does nothing at all to dislodge the word of God, which abides for ever. To the contrary. It serves instead to make that word more certain. All flesh is grass, and all its glory like the flower of the fields. Dust you are. To dust you shall return. No ifs, ands or buts. Die you must and die you shall.

The awful word tonight is simply this. Face up to it. Get used to it. If it drives you to cry out in terror, so be it.

And yet St. Paul will say to all of us tonight, "Be reconciled to God."

That is, quit hating God. Quit fighting against God's Word. Quit loathing God's ways. How shall I do this? How on earth shall

you?

Answer: on earth in the person of Christ Jesus was God's own solution to the impossible conundrum of our sinning.

Here is a mercy stranger by far than the mercy by which God kills me.

On earth in the person of Jesus-begotten of God-was a God-given chance for all of us to take out all our sinners' wrath, all our sinners' fear and desperation and to pour it out in a deadly attack on the person of God himself.

This is what we did. We killed the Son of God. What more can sinners do to God? Let there be an end to our hatred of him.

Again, on earth in the person of Jesus-born of Mary-was a God-given chance for God to pour out all his wrath, all his frustration on the head of one of us who, even so, would not turn against him and start to hate the ways of his strange and awful mercy.

Because Jesus died our death; because Jesus kept that faith with God that you and I can never keep: therefore God decrees that Jesus' resurrection will be our future.

Because of Jesus God now sees fit to make this promise: your death and mine will be for him an excuse to make us brand new, forever able to love him and to enjoy him as the holy angels do.

And he asks us tonight simply to trust this. He asks us to do this for Jesus' sake. He asks us to remember how much we matter to him, our sin notwithstanding. He asks us to assume that this promise of his is every bit as true, every bit as certain, as that first, that deadly word we will hear tonight.

Should you choose to come up here tonight for the imposition of

ashes, you will hear that first, that deadly word. But on your forehead will be traced the sign of the cross, that same sign under which you were baptized into the everlasting promise of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

When you get home tonight, look in the mirror. Look closely at the sign. Remember why you get to hope in God despite your present sin, despite the sinners' death that you will die. Then make it your project this Lent to trust the everlasting love of God for you in Christ. Make it your project this Lent to war, not against God, but against your sinners' instincts to fight with God. Make it your project this Lent to love and honor God in new ways, through a life worthy of God's wonderful promise and your magnificent calling in Jesus Christ your Lord.

Soli Deo Gloria