

SAINT GEORGE'S CHURCH
A LENTEN MESSAGE FROM YOUR RECTOR
The Rev. Wilfredo Benitez
ASH WEDNESDAY 2019

Today we enter the holy season of Lent. It is Ash Wednesday and I write this letter from the sanctuary of Saint George's Church. There is an air of tranquility in the church, as penitents enter to receive ashes on their foreheads, and Gregorian Chant plays softly in the background. The steeple bells toll above, pouring their sound into the busy and frantic pace of life on Main Street. For those who enter this sacred space, it is an opportunity to pause, and reflect on their mortality, and the sheer marvel that we're made of cosmic dust; and our mortal bodies will one day return to dust. Some people come for Ashes out of a sense of religious duty, a sort of holy obligation, others come guided by an unspoken force that goes beyond a sacred obligation, something compelling them to do come; and there is no need for rational explanations. I hope and pray that once inside this sacred space, all are move beyond a sense of duty, and enter the mystery of our existence. Where do we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? In the background a crying baby boy disrupts the peace, but alas, it is the cry of an infant soul barely starting the journey of life. A newborn baby that at some point in his life, if he is blessed to live into adulthood, will have to contend with his own mortality, and search for meaning the journey through life.

As I sit here, I'm in touch with events that generate pain in people's lives. I reflect and hold in prayer the recent pain members of the LGBTQ community have been forced to endure, both in our Anglican Communion, and in the United Methodist Church. Currently, self-avowed, gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual persons cannot be ordained in the Methodist Church, or be married to a same sex partner. The Methodists, had an opportunity at their General Conference to welcome unequivocally the LGBTQ community, as our Episcopal Church (ECUSA) has done, but they chose not to follow the Way of Love and inclusivity, preferring instead the false security of exclusion in the name of God. On a similar vein, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has withheld an invitation to bishops from the Episcopal Church (ECUSA) who are married to same sex spouses, to attend the Lambeth Conference dinner of the worldwide Anglican Communion in 2020. This affects 2 of our bishops in the Episcopal Church, and their spouses: Bishop Gene Robinson, and Bishop Mary Glasspool. This also affects Bishop Kevin Robertson, a bishop of the Anglican Church of Canada, and his spouse. All other heterosexual spouses are invited to attend the Lambeth dinner. Once again, the ugly face of ignorance-based discrimination and homophobia shows its ugly face. My heart goes out to those excluded.

The Holy season of Lent is a time of penitence, not only for our individual sins, but also for our institutional sins. We no longer live in the Dark Ages; we are 21st Century Christians, with 21st Century knowledge of human sexuality, and a wealth of Biblical scholarship non-existent in ages past. To rely on past interpretations of the Biblical

texts, ignoring the body of knowledge we currently have, is a sin we too often commit, even when we convince ourselves that we do it for the “good of the church.” I am thankful for the Episcopal Church of the United States of America, and its choice to be open and affirming, welcoming the LGBTQ community, through baptism, as full members of the Body of Christ, without any form of discrimination, or exclusion to any of its sacraments, including Marriage, and Holy Orders. This is also something that Saint George’s Church upholds through its own mission statement, that predates my arrival as the Rector.

Back to the present, as I continue to sit in the sanctuary, and I observe the Ash Wednesday procession of people coming into the church, and out of the cold, I am in touch with the 40-day journey ahead; and rather than ponder on things we can give up during Lent, I reflect on the most difficult thing to give up, our own willfulness. Just how willing are we to enter this most sacred of the church’s season, leaving behind our destructive willfulness?

There is so much for which penitence and true repentance needs to happen, on so many levels, national, ecclesial, communal, and personal. Lent is a time to be penitent, while coming to terms with our poverty of Spirit, as we journey for the next 40 days, within all of these contexts and others that affect us. Let’s remember that Lent is a time of desert, dryness, emptiness (even if it’s freezing cold and icy outside). Lent is a time when we follow in the foot-steps of Jesus, to all those places of woundedness requiring healing. According to the gospel, Jesus was tormented and tempted in the desert, by those things lurking underneath his own shadow existence, as he fasted for 40 days. Today we begin our Lenten journey, and we too will be tormented if we move beyond our complacency into the deeper mystery of grace; but not to fear, like Jesus, we will be sustained by grace, and in the end life triumphs over death.

So, as we enter this holy season, and ponder the many places of woundedness in our lives (and in the lives of others) I ask that we hold dear and close to our hearts the harsh reality that *we are dust, and to dust we shall return*. The wealth of our being does not rely on us, it relies exclusively on the grace of God, our poverty of spirit, and our willingness to surrender in the deepest humility, as our Lord did, during his 40-day desert journey.

Blessed Lent,

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