

In the midst of life, we are in death.

Notker the Stammerer wrote that line in the 9th century, and it comes down to us from one of the very first Books of Common Prayer, Thomas Cranmer's 1552 book – we still use Notker's anthem as part of the burial rite, if you've been to many funerals in the Episcopal Church you'll be familiar with this anthem: "In the midst of life, we are in death, from whom can we seek help? From you alone, O Lord. Lord, you know the secrets of our hearts; shut not your ears to our prayers, but spare us, O Lord." The story goes that Notker, who was a Swiss monk at the monastery of St. Gall, was watching some 9th century construction workers building a bridge over a deep chasm, and he was reflecting on the peril they were in as they went about their business. Last night, when I got home after the Shrove Tuesday service, I was planning on working on this sermon and I thought I'd turn on the Olympics for the figure skating and then get some work done when they cut away to the other events – yeah, that didn't work so well, but I was thinking about this anthem, and Notker watching these guys building the bridge over the chasm as I watched these incredible athletes perform what, to me, seem like death-defying leaps into the air, these incredible spins, and there's something there about defiance

in the face of death, this incredible beauty that comes out of men and women performing at the height of their abilities, staring death right in the face as they compete for these medals – young, vigorous, in great shape, right? The beautiful people of the world, and here's Notker the Stammerer from the ninth century, "in the midst of life, we are in death." Side by side, the quadruple axel and the burial rite. In the midst of life, we are in death.

[There's a truism about funerals, that they're really not so much for – or even about – the person who is being remembered, but they're for and about us, the living, we who are in the midst of life, and are in death. And so it's appropriate, I think, to mark Ash Wednesday not simply with the imposition of ashes, but with the singing of the requiem, the Missa defunctorum – the mass of the deceased. Not just as a way to remember those whom we love, who are no longer living, but as a way of reminding ourselves that we stand in the midst of that company, that the line which separates the living from the dead is a thin, thin one – a line that the mystery of Easter, the mystery of the Resurrection threatens to break right through. We come close to death in this service today – we come close to that great pretense that most of us carry with us, the illusion that we are immortal, that death is a reality that we can put off or delay or simply ignore. We come close to who we really are.]

Each year on Ash Wednesday we hear this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus warns us in the strongest possible terms against practicing our piety in public, as a kind of performance, a kind of public show. He says “When you fast, don’t do it like the hypocrites who disfigure their faces, but clean up your face so that nobody knows what you’re doing.” Do it in private. Do it in secret. Pay attention to your motivation. Are you doing it to be seen? Are you doing it because it’s the “right” thing to do? Or are you doing it for God?

We read this gospel – and then we troop up to this altar and get ashes imposed on our foreheads in an act of public piety, right? We read Jesus’ words – don’t practice your piety before others,” and then we turn right around and do it.

The very thing he warned us against. What’s going on here?

We do it – we ostensibly fly in the face of Jesus’ warning – for a bunch of reasons, not least of which because it is our tradition, going back to the earliest days of Christianity, in the days of excommunication, when to be reconciled back to the Church you had to go through a period of penitence, which included sackcloth and ashes, prayer and fasting, and ultimate reception back into the body of the faithful at the Easter vigil. Sackcloth and ashes as a sign of remorse and penitence, of course, goes back to the Hebrew scriptures, and the ancient

liturgical grammar at work in this service of penitence and remembrance is deep, it's rich, it's the deep grammar of our tradition, the ancient rhythm of our faith that's at work today.

So if there's this tension between the gospel readings and the public acts at this service, it's somehow appropriate, because this day is ultimately about tension - it's about who we think you are, and who we really are. About pretense and reality. And if Ash Wednesday is about stripping off the masks that we throw up, the game face with which we confront the world, maybe the most resilient mask of all is the mask of our immortality. That seductive way in which we convince ourselves that we're not gonna die. And I'm not talking about the things we do to stay healthy or to look young, although that might be part of it, the wrinkle creams and gym memberships. But no, the attempt to stave off death - to hide behind a mask of youth or health or vigor or whatever, trying to pretend that we're not going to die - that's a hard mask to lose, and it's that mask, that pretense of control over our very breath, our very life force - that's the mask we come to Ash Wednesday in order to lose. Being confronted with that mask, that deception, that performance, is what Lent is all about.

You come face to face with that mask, with that pretense – it crumbles to dust right before your eyes. You stand before God with nothing but your dying body, this bag of bones that we carry around. All the pretense, all the excuses, all the defense mechanisms turned to dust and ashes at your feet. It's as if the priest reaches down and, out of the ashes of who you thought you were, all that remains of the life you thought was yours to live, out of the ashes of sin and death, the priest traces the sign of the cross on your forehead. You are dust, and to dust you will return.

That's the hard truth. Lent is all about facing up the hard truths. But this is a season that is ultimately not about beating ourselves up over our sin, our mortality, our failure to commend the faith the faith that is in us. Lent isn't supposed to be a guilt trip – really, I mean it. The Season of Lent, getting ready to come close to the mystery of the Resurrection, the mystery of Easter – this season of penitence and preparation is not an exercise in that perverse human desire to wallow in our own unrighteousness, to muck around in our own psychology, our self-involvement in our own sin. Lent's about turning away from all of that – that's what repentance literally means – to turn. To turn away from our incredible ability to beat ourselves up, our narcissistic need to

strike our breast and proclaim our unworthiness. That kind of repentance, that kind of guilt-ridden psychological self-mutilation – I think that’s actually what Jesus is warning us against in today’s gospel. That’s a performance, it’s a pretense, it gets us stuck behind another mask, which is the mask of our own unworthiness. The call for us, the call to observe a holy Lent – that’s a call to move beyond guilt, to lose the mask of unworthiness and stand before God as we actually are. It’s a call to repentance. It’s a call to turn.

And we need to turn together. We have to. Jesus warns us to be very in touch with our motivations on this day, to avoid any kind of public pretense, any attempt to fool ourselves or each other. I think that’s why we observe Ash Wednesday as a community, because together we can act as mirrors – as reality checks - for each other. We turn together – we turn away from our own psychologies, our own self-indulgent navel-gazing – and we turn towards each other. To actually look at each other. That’s what I think is so incredible about coming forward to this altar and having the cross traced on your forehead in ashes. You turn around, and the ash is on your forehead, but you can’t see it. But you can see it on somebody else’s forehead. In fact, by the end of the service, we’re all marked – those of us that chose to come up for the imposition

– which, by the way, is not required. You're invited to come forward, you're certainly not mandated. But the point is that we're doing it together. We come forward to receive the ashes on our foreheads as a way of reminding ourselves of who we really are. On the one hand it's an intensely private moment - and yet, everybody is watching. And that's the point: we remember who we really are not just in the privacy of our own homes, but together, as a community. I can't see the mark on my forehead, but I can see the mark on yours. And there is no difference there, no difference between us. Before God, at this altar, we stand together because there are no distinctions between us. Lay or ordained, male or female, young, old, gay, straight, Christian or not. The babies among us – they get the ashes too. There's not much I can think of that's more powerful for me as a priest than making the sign of the cross on the forehead of a newborn baby, so full of life and promise – remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. In the midst of life – at the very beginning of life – we are in death. That's the truth. But when we come face to face with that reality, we discover that we don't have to be afraid. [Gabriel Faure said of his requiem, "It has been said that my Requiem does not express the fear of death and someone has called it a [lullaby](#) of death. But it is thus that

I see death: as a happy deliverance, an aspiration towards happiness, rather than as a painful experience.”

I think he’s right, and it’s why I think this gorgeous music is such a perfect way to experience this solemn and yet intensely beautiful service. We are, each of us, marked by death. Turning from our illusions and facing reality head on gives us a freedom, a liberty not to be defined by our death, but to embrace life with a passion that’s not born out of desperation and fear but out of authenticity and honesty. Lent reminds us that the Christian life is above all else about telling the truth - the truth about who we are, and who God is. Knowing the truth about who we really are is what sets us free to become the people, the community, the Church that God is calling us to be. The truth sets us free - the cross sets us free - death sets us free. Notker the Stammerer had it right, in the midst of life we are in death – all of us go down to the dust, yet even at the grave, we make our song. Faure was right, death is not something to be feared, it’s something to be sung. As terrible, as painful, as devastating as death often is, the truth of Ash Wednesday is that death is also where joy begins. Amen.