

Ash Wednesday
St. Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21
March 1, 2017
St. George's Church Bolton
Fr. Chris

Life is Good!

Ashes to ashes; Dust to dust.
Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return.

Words we might not be anxious to hear. Humbling words. And in our hearts we know that they are very true words. Would that we lived by them is the message of Ash Wednesday.

We don't want to hear these words because they remind us of death, the end of our mortal life. Who wants to dwell on that?

And then a loved one, a friend, a neighbor or a co-worker dies and we attend a funeral, and we hear those words. *"In the midst of life we are in death, of whom may we seek for comfort, but of thee, O Lord."* *"Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust."*

Indeed, we seek comfort in God. But pondering our own mortal demise also packs a gift for us: It *affirms* the value of this life that is to be *lived*. It encourages us to value every precious second we have, every breath we take.

Indeed, *life is good*, like the words on the popular T-Shirts and Jeep spare tire covers. This life *is* good. It is special. It is not a gift to be squandered, but rather, cherished and treasured. Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also. Life and death are placed before you: choose life that you may live, and

not death that you may be sick, dwindle and die. So say the words of the author of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament.

Life is good. All life is about the way of *Good* vs. the way of not good, that is the way of *bad & wrong*.

You choose: God is good. God's way is good.

God's way is peace. It yields a conscience free of trouble and anxiety, and more importantly, a mind not preoccupied by guilt and unredeemed, unforgiven sins. This is very good.

God's way is harmony. It is living a good life that fits like a glove, living a life that is given us to fit in such a way. A good life is like a choir singing in harmony, with not a voice out of tune, not a voice sounding a note of disharmony, but a choir sounding forth in unity of purpose with out dischord and fulfilling the promise for which it was created and drawn together. Harmony is good.

The good life is marked by the qualities exhorted in the Gospel this evening: generosity, prayer, living simply in the words about fasting, seeking good for its own sake and the sake of the *quality* of goodness, and of course, tying all these together is one word, *humility*.

Lent is a season of generosity, as deep as that of the generosity found in the Advent season when we prepare to give gifts at Christmass. We are to be givers for the sake of the goodness of giving, never seeking credit and always eschewing the need for vocalizations of gratitude by the recipients of our kindness. Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Seek opportunities to be generous every hour of every day. Keep your eyes open to the needs of others. Look to make life good for someone else. Pass it forward. Pass it on. *Never pass on it!* Generosity makes life

good, whether you are a giver or receiver, but the former is the greater good with the most power to make your life good.

Lent is a season prayer. Prayer is good communication with God, unobstructed by ego, pride or pretension. Prayer is always truthful, as it is pointless to be untruthful with the One who knows the secrets of our hearts, both good and dark. Prayer is the practice of *being in the presence of God*. You can not be in the presence of the real God without being profoundly humble, lacking any hubris in the presence of an all perfect, all powerful, all loving infinite being. Life is good when your life becomes a prayer offered up to God.

Lent is a season of fasting, but how about trying a fasting from things and stuff? Try a permanent fast that simplifies your life and lightens your burdens. Try a fast that not only frees you to live a good life, but one that also enables generosity as you share your bounty with others, or at the very least, recycle the resources with which you were entrusted for a time. A fast removes from us the things which by absorbing our attention and concern, disable the potential to see God at work in our lives, that God is always walking with us, always being present to us. A fast slows down life to see the good in yourself, others and the creation you have been given to live in.

God is good. We can see this in God's creation, that it is good. The very first book of the Bible shouts this out to us: God saw each phase of creation, and saw that *it was good*. The good creator creates a good creation in God's image. Life is good, and it is sweetened by the simplicity of a soul that is simple and good, built up by fasting and shedding the shell created by pretension and possession.

Lent is a season that humbles us in a good way. To learn and practice humility is always a good thing. We are told not to seek the praise of others for our generosity and kindness. We are told not to seek praise or status for the holiness or righteousness with which we conduct our lives. We are told to wash our faces and not to present with grimness and sadness when we are fasting. When we pray, we should pray in secret, just as our God listens to our prayers in secret, the unseen God for whom my soul in silence waits.

Life is good. God is good. God is the God of Good Friday. Can this be a *good Wednesday*? We begin Lent here, and it is completed as the sun sets on Good Friday.

Lent is a time to affirm not only life in general, but your life in particular. We spend a lot of time thinking about what is wrong with us and what we have done wrong. We spend far less time focusing on what is good about us. So I invite you to do this in this Lenten season. Find the good in yourself and celebrate it, nurture it, give it a chance to grow. What is *really good* in you is God. Pray for the help of the Great Farmer to tend your secret private garden, and let it be blessed with God's presence, to make its goodness a special and fruitful place for you. Let God help your spiritual garden prosper. Find time to affirm the gifts you have been given and give thanks for the people and places which have made up your life. You will discover that life really *is* good.

What do we need to know about Ash Wednesday? It helps remind us of the value of every precious minute of our lives! It is time to clean our houses and to dust things off. What's the difference between the dust in your duster and the dust that makes up you? Ash Wednesday reminds us that it's what is left behind after the dusting. Do we plan to leave only dust and ashes from a life barely lived, filled with lots of dusty old stuff,

or a life of sparkling treasure which shines brightly from the lives our conglomeration of dust has touched? I hope we are the fairy dust that is sprinkled on others to make them proclaim, *'Life is good, thank you God!'*

So what's up with Ash Wednesday? It helps let Lent be a time to take back your life, to reclaim your freedom, to boost your spiritual resources and to refocus our lives on what is really important. Life is good, and Ash Wednesday reminds us to be the good people in life that God wants us to be: peacemakers; healers; teachers; gift givers; people of prayers; servers; waiters; feeders; cleaners; recyclers; voters; caregivers; and most importantly, *lovers*.

Anytime you begin anew is good. Let this Wednesday, March 1st, be a birthday: A *new birth* into a *new life* or a *renewed* life. Happy birthday to us! AMEN