

Tonight we remember that we are mortal. That we are made of stardust and to dust we shall return, carbon to carbon. And why do we do this, year after year? As if our unexpected aches and pains were not enough to remind us that we are mortal!

We do it because as humans we are prone to hubris. Hubris is a word from ancient Greek which meant an overweening presumption that leads a person to disregard the divinely fixed limits on human action in an ordered cosmos. Hubris leads us to imagine that as long as we have enough money or a big enough house that we will be ok; hubris leads us to think that we can go it alone without God, hubris leads us to think that we are immortal.

The opposite of hubris is humility – which is knowing your place in the world - which is never the lowest of the low – imagining that you are the most terrible sinner and not worthy of God’s love is a kind of inverted hubris because it is refusing to accept the gift of God’s grace. Humility is knowing who you are – a beloved child of God – no better and no worse than anyone else. Humility is knowing your failings as well as your gifts and giving them all to be used in God’s service.

St Benedict had a lot to say about humility. He reminded his monks of Jacob’s dream in which he saw a ladder with angels ascending and descending. In a kind of cosmic chutes and ladders, Benedict said that you go up the ladder by humility and you descend by pride or hubris. Which leads him to talk about surrender.

Surrender is not a popular word in our culture, but it is an important one spiritually because if we are to grow spiritually, to grow closer to God, at some point we have to say like Mary to the angel, “Be it unto me according to *your word*” At some point we have to align our will with God’s and give our lives over to God as we understand God. And that is surrender, that is coming to God with humility.

In the first reading we heard that the people of Israel were going through the motions – they were ostentatiously fasting and following religious rituals but not living the lives of peace and justice that would demonstrate that they were people of the one true God who is the embodiment of peace, justice and love. And God was quite clear that they were on the wrong track. God is not interested in religious observance which is just outward show. God is not interested in pride and hubris masquerading as piety.

God looks on the heart. God looks at what is going on inside us. Having ash on your face is pointless unless it is matched by humility in your heart, unless it is matched by your dependence upon God's love.

And why would we not depend on God?

Because my friends we are humans, and humans tend to pride and hubris.

But the path of humility and surrender to divine love is the path which gives life. It may appear to be going down the chute but as Benedict points out, it is actually going up the ladder towards union with God. Because we can trust God to know the very best thing for us in every circumstance - in every moment we can choose to trust in God and God's path. And that choice is what draws us closer.

It draws us closer to the author of our very being, it draws us closer to divine fire, it draws us closer to divine love.

But to make the choice to trust in God and God's love means that we can no longer boast about our achievements or our activities or our possessions because we realize that all we have is a gift from God, given to us just because. And all that seems to go wrong in our lives is also part of our walk with God – it is not a punishment, it just is, it just is part of being human living this life. When we are fully surrendered to God, we know that nothing can get between us and the unquenchable love of

God, no amount of hardship or suffering separates us from the God to whom we belong.

And that is a place of peace.

So tonight, as we come to God in repentance together, let us not see it as some kind of ritual back-beating, but as a corporate acknowledgement that we are human, and that because we are human we depend on the God who made us and loves us. And let us take this opportunity to step a little further into surrendering to the Holy Spirit, let us take another step on the ladder of humility which leads us into union with the Christ.