

In the early 15th century, the monastic and mystic, Thomas À Kempis wrote a meditation on death:

“Very quickly our life here will end” he wrote. “ ... In every word and deed, we must live our lives today as if we were to die tonight. ... if we are not ready to die today, how will we be ready to die tomorrow? Tomorrow is not certain. We can’t even guarantee there will be a tomorrow.

“What does it profit us to live longer, but not better? ... Oh, may we spend a single day in this world as we ought to spend it!

“... we must not put off living out our salvation ... Now is the time to do good and help others. Now is the most important time. Now is the right time and the day of salvation. ... The hour will come when we will yearn for one more day – even one hour – to change our lives. Happy are people who are always thinking of the hour of their death and prepare daily to die.”¹

It's not particularly jolly, but it is wise counsel. Being mindful of our own death might sound a bit morbid to our 21st century ears, but being mindful of human impermanence is a spiritual/philosophical practice that's very old indeed and it's widespread, found in cultures across the planet. It might get framed differently, in some places as the ultimate anticipation of divine judgement, or as the very present pursuit of freedom from earthly anxieties, or as an ethical or moral imperative to live rightly –

¹ Thomas À Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ: Classic Devotions in Today's Language*, Compiled and Ed. James N. Watkins (Franklin TN: Worthy Inspired, 2015), 255-7.

but what's shared, across cultures, is *the power* held in the remembrance of one's own death, the power *that* mindful awareness has to transform our life as its being lived.

Thomas À Kempis wrote his meditation on death at a time when Europe was still reeling from the impact of the Black Death, a plague which took the lives of about 50 million people, which was about half the population of Europe. It's perhaps no surprise then that symbols of death in art - "memento mori" as they're called - were commonplace at that time. *Memento mori* are visible, symbolic reminders of the inevitability of death for all, they're images or objects that prompt the viewer into being mindful of their own death. The phrase "memento mori" is Latin, and means "remember you will die." Common *memento mori* in Thomas À Kempis' time were skulls, and bones, skeletons, the scythe representing the grim reaper, and the hourglass, depicting the limited nature of our time on earth.

These *memento mori* were really like visual/symbolic sermons on life: given the temporary nature of life, what is it, they ask the viewer, what is it you're living *for*. These images, objects, and symbols, encourage mindful consideration of life, what is truly important? How should each precious moment be spent?

On Ash Wednesday we receive the *memento mori* of our Christian tradition today, ashes, in the sign of the cross. Today the cross we'll receive in ashes, this 'sermon on life' given form and made visible for all to see, this *memento mori* has our attention. The cross we'll receive says remember you will die... .. remember that, it says, *so you might be intentional* about how you live.

Much like those who were alive in the 15th century, none of us need to be reminded of the reality of death in the world around us - the violence that fills our newsfeeds, the feelings of threat and fear that are so hard to avoid for so many, the fear and threat of death lived daily by so many in our world.

The *memento mori* is not a symbol of defeat or despair, a symbol to incite fear or dread – instead it's a call into the possibility and hope that is always: life. And for us, as followers of Jesus, that's a call into fullness of life as living members of the body of Christ.

The *memento mori* we receive today is a visual reminder that we are God's creation, beloved of God, that our true state is to love, and to live fully, and that we all, regardless of age, or state of health, or material circumstance, we *all* have the ability to draw closer to God and to continue to journey on into greater fullness of life.

The *memento mori* we receive today holds urgency in the possibility it represents, there is no time to lose.

The cross in ashes we receive disrupts our attention from the clutter and distraction of everyday life, and refocuses us .. as we enter a season of self-exploration, and self-examination. What are the obstacles we've put in our own way, how can we slough off our own habits of thought and action that separate us from God and one another, in spite of the very many circumstances of our lives that we can't control. How might we accept God's ever-present invitation into ever-greater fullness of life, accept that invitation right now, today...

We none of us know how short or long our lives will be, but we have *this* moment.

As Thomas À Kempis wrote in his own time, "... we must not put off living out our salvation ... Now is the time ... Now is the most important time. Now is the right time and the day of salvation."

We will begin this season of Lent with a *memento mori* before our eyes, so we might not put off living out our salvation a moment longer.

What can the cross in ashes teach us this Ash Wednesday; this season of Lent, what can it teach us; what can it help us to understand about the way we have been living, and the way we might choose to live from this moment on?

This is our right beginning for a Holy Lent; the cross in ashes a mark of our mortal nature; the *memento mori* of the church which is nothing less than Christ's abiding invitation from death into life.