

REMEMBER JESUS CHRIST

So it begins again. We count backward from Easter, but without counting Sundays. We count backward from Easter for forty days, representing Jesus' time of prayer and temptations in the wilderness right after His baptism. Very probably Jesus was already spiritually advanced beyond most humans of His time, but He had a huge spiritual awakening at His baptism. A voice from Heaven – perhaps Jesus was the only one who heard it, though it doesn't matter because Jesus *did* hear it: “*You are my beloved Son – in you I am well pleased.*” Nobody ever really expects to hear such a thing in this world. Not from God.

How very wonderful! How very nice! Except now what do you do? What could be more disconcerting than finding out who you really are? And finding out that you have a role to play far beyond anything you ever wanted or dared to imagine?

So Jesus has gone into the wilderness. He will not come out until He has found some clarity – some guidance and perspective – about His true identity and what He is supposed to do about it. Don't just do something – stand there: wait for the shock to wear off; wait for the first impressions to quiet down; wait for the personal motives to find their proper place. And what about Satan? Jesus seems to know what we do not want to know: Satan will always be trying to get his oar in.

All around us we see people struggling with life – people caught in various traps of addiction, depression, fear, loneliness. Some of them we know fairly well, and they are going along just fine until all at once something interrupts their journey, their progress. What looked like a happy, productive life gets snagged, caught, sidetracked into the patterns of one of the Seven Deadly Sins. We care about them. Many others care about them. With all the resources available to us in our great society, it should be easy, should it not? It should be a simple thing to arrest the unfortunate trend and return them to health and strength. It should be easy to stop the downward trend of a church or a business or a school or a family or a nation. What could possibly be making it so hard?

Jesus is not just having trouble with Pharisees and Sadducees. He is not just having problems because of the priests or the Sanhedrin or the rabbis or the scribes. Satan is always trying to get his oar in.

Satan always magnifies our fear and our mistrust; always distorts our hopes and our purposes; always corrupts our dreams and our images of what we really want. Satan always whispers in our ears about what we can control and accomplish ... if we just try a little bit harder. Satan is always trying to get his oar in. How else can Satan continue to do so much damage on the earth?

So the forty days are about Jesus praying and His contact with the Spirit, but also His dealing with Satan.

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So Lent begins again for us. We take extra time with the Spirit too. We learn a lot from watching Jesus. We learn some principles of prayer; we learn something about Satan's wiles; we learn to watch for the spiritual dimension that is always running alongside the physical dimension. But we also learn from Jesus that even though His identity is far beyond our own, *we* have a true and special spiritual identity also. And though His mission and purpose are greater than we can fully fathom even still, *we* each have a special mission and purpose too. We are members of His Body – the true *ecclesia*. It is no longer okay with us to pretend we do not have a part to play or that it does not matter if we neglect or ignore our own vocatio. We remember Jesus Christ.

Ashes are a sign of repentance, and repentance is often mixed with remorse. Can we participate in this Service of Ashes without going negative – without letting sorrow into the picture? I hope you can. I never can. But I do know that sorrow and remorse are not the real purpose. Repentance, when genuine, is frequently full of joy and hope. We *repent* because we find ourselves invited into a different way. We *turn* (the real meaning of repentance) toward something that we suddenly know is better, brighter, more important than what we have been heading toward. Nobody ever enters the Kingdom or heads more deeply into the Kingdom without repentance. It is Jesus' first and clearest message (as it was John's before Him): "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" How can any of us head toward the Kingdom without turning – without repenting?

Is anybody in this world really that "perfect"? Is anybody here "good enough" that if the rest of the 7.2 billion of us were to be that good too, we would have a perfect world? Or even an okay world?

But Jesus calls to us: “Don’t keep going after piddly little stuff. Come with me. We have good and glorious things to head for. And no, it will not be easy. Why? Did you want it or need it to be easy? The gate is narrow because the treasure is so incredible.”

So anyway, I still feel the sorrow and remorse because it took me longer than it should have to turn away from some of the “piddly little stuff.” I do not doubt the forgiveness; gratitude for forgiveness and mercy is a huge part of my reality. But it does not impair my memory. I do not like remembering some of the damage I did. And yes, it feels good to make amends when that is possible. But some things we cannot repair. Some things we cannot pay for. Some things we cannot heal or make right. Maybe in the next realm; we will see. Meanwhile I am just grateful for new chances and some of the new days that keep coming. But the ashes are something I understand. Except, of course, they also always carry a Phoenix Principle with them. I did not always know that. In Christendom, new things *always* rise out of the ashes. That is an amazing principle – an amazing secret – our Lord opened up for us. In the presence of the Holy Spirit, new things always rise out of the ashes of our lives – if we repent; if we allow it.

So we remember Jesus Christ. We remember what He showed us by the way He lived. We remember what He taught us in His teachings and parables. We remember that He returned alive for us – in the Holy Spirit that accompanies us wherever we go. And we remember the HOPE that now surrounds all of our living, all of our dying, all of our trials, all of our joys, all of our relationships – even the ones that are not going very well at the moment.

So it begins again for us. Forty days to realign and reorient our lives – because we remember Him.

What shall we give up this Lent? Nothing at all. Our Savior is not one who denies or negates life. If we die to an old life, it is always to receive a better one. If we abandon or neglect some old habits, it is because we have started to want some better ones. If we turn aside from some goal or purpose that used to enthrall us, it is because the light and the promise of some greater and more joyful purpose have come into view.

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Sometimes Lent seems pretty serious, maybe even grim, to the outsiders. But perhaps they do not see that the seriousness is only the outward side of focus and concentration. We remember Jesus Christ because He lights up our lives: gives us more peace and joy and love and hope than we ever know what to do with. But we are learning to trust Him more and more. And each time we do, the light gets even brighter.

So we turn toward new possibilities. And when we do that, some things are bound to fall by the wayside. From a distance it might look like we have given them up; we have made a noble sacrifice; we are amazingly disciplined and committed. I am so spiritually advanced – so far along the Path – that I take the trash out every Friday morning. But the truth is, I do not want it lying around; I do not want to keep stepping in it. There is a place for trash, and I do not really want it in my living room anymore.

Lent is for greater clarity: more awareness of the grace and love and forgiveness we are offered by the Holy Spirit. Lent is for drawing closer to the greatest Being we have ever known. How sad if we tell ourselves that we are giving up something we really want or that we are sacrificing something out of duty or resignation, because we are convinced it would be good for us or good for some of the people around us – even though we do not understand why or how. Is it ever possible for us to simply admit that we want to spend more time with Jesus, the Christ of God?

It is my suspicion that most of us know some things still lurking in our lives – still taking time and energy from us all the time – that are in the way of our relationship with the Holy Spirit. It's time perhaps to see them in a clearer light – to see them for what they really are and for the benefits they really represent. If so, then gently, quietly – without fanfare or drawing more attention to them than necessary – we simply let them go. They fall by the wayside. We are the children of God – the children of light. And how very grateful we are to have the opportunity to spend time with the One who has made LIFE so clear and so beautiful for us.

PRAYER

Great Spirit, we seek Your forgiveness. It is not only that we want to be relieved of our burdens; we are also eager to come at last to that quality of confidence in Your love for us that, having been forgiven ourselves, we may be capable of true forgiveness for everyone You send to us. Forgive our sins, O Lord. Forgive us the sins of the present and the sins of the past. Forgive us the sins of the body and the sins of the soul. Forgive us the sins we have done to please ourselves and the sins we have done to please others. Forgive us our wanton and idle sins. Forgive us our serious and deliberate sins. Forgive us the sins we have labored so to hide from others that we have hidden them even from ourselves. Forgive them all Great Lord, and help us so to trust Your mercy, Your power, Your love – that we may be truly healed, truly ready to be Your reconcilers whenever and wherever You call us to be. We pray it in the name of Jesus the Christ, who lived it out before us, and for our salvation.

SERVICE OF ASHES

“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” (Revelation 3:19-20)

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock.” I always want the ashes to represent the fact that we have burned down that door. But it is never that simple, is it? *“The gate is narrow, and the way is hard that leads to life.”*

Please muse with me for just a moment. Where are we? I mean where is the passage coming from? This is not one of the four Gospels. We are in the Book of Revelation, which often speaks the Gospel more than many people know. But on a time line, we are way past the crucifixion and way past the Resurrection. So yes, for most of us it is the voice of Jesus, but Jesus in a higher dimension. For any of us still struggling with details beyond our understanding, one verse later it says: *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* (Revelation 3:22) That is, it is not Jesus the Nazarene who is speaking – it is Jesus the Holy Spirit.

So this is the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord who is talking to us. And in this instance, who is the Spirit speaking to? Well, on the surface at least, to the church at Laodicea – one of the seven churches of the Book of Sevens, which we call REVELATION because it is so revealing.

I don't think I will lose many of you if I suggest that the seven churches represent all of Christendom. They represent seven different categories of churches, in different levels of awareness and faithfulness. The Book of Revelation circulated in a world where the Christian movement was still rather small, yet there were hundreds of churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire by the time this book was written. And as they heard the scroll read or obtained a copy of their own, they all asked themselves: Where do *we* fit among the seven churches? How are we doing? Are we among the more faithful – or the less faithful – of the seven churches?

Of course, things have been progressing since then. When the Spirit speaks of standing at the door and knocking, who do we think is being addressed in *our* time? All Christendom everywhere? At least that. I grant you, it is hard to fathom; it is even harder to imagine what would happen if all Christians everywhere would open the door. *Oy veh!* But at least that.

However, we are still thinking too small. “*Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in*” The Spirit is knocking at the door of every living person on the face of the earth. The Spirit crosses all borders, transcends all boundaries. A Buddhist or a Hindu or a Muslim or a Jew may not use the same vocabulary I use or understand the experience in the same framework that makes sense to me, but the Spirit is knocking on *every* door – on the door of conscious awareness of every living soul on the face of the earth. And the promise I hear is being made to them also: “If you open the door, I will come in.”

What is wrong with the world today? Knowing what's wrong does not mean we can fix it. But what is wrong is that most of us – Christians and non-Christians alike – are not ready or willing to open the door: we are not willing or ready to let the Holy Spirit guide and direct our lives. If everyone on the planet were suddenly willing to receive grace and forgiveness; willing to acknowledge their higher identity; willing to work and live under the orders from the BEING who is greater, wiser, more compassionate than any of *us* are – the BEING who knows the true purposes and plans of the Omnipotent God – well, in three days the place would be completely unrecognizable.

The invitation is genuine. The promise is still good. Every person on earth has the opportunity to open this door. Most are not ready or willing. Many pretend they have a prior appointment. Lots of us pretend we have never heard the invitation or the promise. Lots of us have covered our bets by pretending to be spiritually awake and aware but insisting, at least within ourselves, that it's nothing personal: God does not care about individuals; the Holy Spirit is just a general principle of inspiration and good intentions. As long as we can keep it nonpersonal, we can manage to stay in control of our choices and our efforts.

So the world stays the same, except for a few who hear the knocking. Some of us, whether from despair at our own efforts or from joy at the invitation of the Great King, want to let Him in. For some of us, the ashes are because we waited for so long. We played "hard to get," were afraid of what would happen to us, or needed to try a little longer to make it all come out like *we* wanted it to.

So I will not try to decide tonight what the ashes mean to you. If you come forward, we will decorate your forehead with ashes. But *you* must decide why you come forward, and what the ashes mean to you.