

ASHES, ASHES, WE ALL FALL DOWN!

*Ring around the rosey, pocketful of posies,
ASHES, ASHES, WE ALL FALL DOWN*

I remember playing *RING AROUND THE ROSEY* with my children when they were little. They never seemed to TIRE of the game, probably because big, old DAD got right down on THEIR level. But, you know: I can't help but wonder WHEN and WHERE and HOW this little CHILD'S verse ORIGINATED. I WONDER if it might have BEEN a Shrove Tuesday or Ash Wednesday TRADITION? After all, the SYMBOLISM fits! The ROSE is OFTEN used as a symbol of LIFE and PEACE, which is what we ALL striving after, and CIRCLING around, all the time. And of course, we DO fall down, DON'T we? YOUNG or OLD, RICH or POOR, we ALL fall down. SOME fall harder than others and more OFTEN, but we ALL fall down. And THAT'S because we are human BEINGS, after all, and NOT God! We are DUST! THAT'S where we COME from, and THAT'S where we're HEADING: *ashes to ashes and dust to dust*, as we say at FUNERALS!

Now, I believe that, for the MOST part, our PROBLEMS in life stem from the fact that we don't WANT it this way. We don't WANT to be DUST! SO, we greedily FIGHT for more POWER, more WEALTH, more FAME, more THINGS, more BEAUTY, more BUSYNESS, and more people DEPENDING on us -- SOMEHOW thinking that we can EARN or BUY, WIN or DESERVE, some kind of IMMORTALITY, as if THAT'S where TRUE fullness of LIFE and peace are to be found. And, just in case THAT doesn't work for us, we are QUICK to judge OTHERS, somehow thinking that we can make OURSELVES look BETTER if we make OTHERS look WORSE.

Well, the message of JESUS, AND the message of the season of LENT, is that we find TRUE fullness of life, TRUE peace, NOT in *running for the roses*, and NOT in collecting more and more THINGS and accolades, but in nurturing our SPIRITUAL lives -- nurturing our INTIMACY with God, and building our lives INCREASINGLY upon GOD'S will and purposes. HOWEVER, the moment we begin to put GOD first in our lives, ONE thing becomes perfectly CLEAR. And THAT is just how *OFF-COURSE* our lives have GOTTEN, and HOW we need to get our lives back *ON-TRACK*. And THAT'S why the season of LENT has become, first and foremost, a time for CONVERSION, a time to turn our lives AROUND and change direction, a time to take the *PLANK* out of our OWN eye, and REBUILD our lives upon the ROCK foundation of our FAITH.

And THAT'S why the traditional Lenten DISCIPLINES have been CREATED, and passed DOWN through the church, Christian to Christian, generation after generation. Those disciplines are STUDY, PRAYER, FASTING, WORSHIP, SILENCE and ACTS of love and service. And I would urge ALL of us to EMBRACE one or MORE of those disciplines during LENT, so that we can better FOCUS our lives on God, AND on our OWN conversion, our OWN turning around. You see: so often we hear about giving UP something for LENT, but that's NOT what it's about. It's about taking ON something for Lent, ONE or MORE of these Lenten disciplines.

HOWEVER, long ago Christians REALIZED that in order to KEEP on doing these Lenten disciplines, and doing them faithfully, we NEED to take a PRIOR step. And THAT step is REPENTANCE. You see, UNLESS we realize and admit that there IS a *PLANK* in our OWN eye, it is IMPOSSIBLE to REMOVE it. And UNLESS we realize and admit that we ARE building our house on SAND, it's impossible to CHANGE and begin BUILDING our house on ROCK. Therefore, AS we EMBARK upon these Lenten disciplines, we NEED to take a good, long, reflective

LOOK in a MIRROR. And friends, THAT is what Ash Wednesday is all ABOUT. It's a DAY for REPENTANCE, a DAY of PENANCE, a DAY to be totally HONEST with ourselves -- AND with GOD -- about WHO we've BEEN, WHO we ARE, and WHO we are becoming.

Now, down through the AGES, our Christian ancestors have developed RITUALS to HELP us make this spiritual JOURNEY of repentance and conversion. And it was in GAUL, during the 6th Century, that a powerful RITUAL for Ash Wednesday was CREATED. It BEGAN with SILENCE, when people would quietly, but honestly EXAMINE their LIVES. THEN, worshippers would come forward, confessing in their HEARTS, the SIN in their lives. And they would KNEEL before their PRIEST, and their priest would ANOINT their foreheads with a cross of ASHED, reminding them: *REMEMBER you are DUST and to DUST you shall RETURN.* And more than **1000** years LATER, that SAME moving RITUAL for Ash Wednesday was STILL being USED, and NOT just in the Roman Catholic Church, but also by MARTIN LUTHER, the great Protestant reformer, as HE built the foundations of the new PROTESTANT Church. Well unfortunately, John Calvin and other REFORMERS, from whom WE descend, sometime LATER, during the 500 years SINCE Martin Luther, LOST this very MOVING ritual of penance and ashes. And it was LOST in OUR strand of the Protestant church until MODERN times, until just a FEW decades AGO, when a NUMBER of us coming out of seminary began trying to RESURRECT it. And I, for one, have had a wonderful RESPONSE to this Ash Wednesday service and RITUAL for almost 30 years. Ash Wednesday became in my PREVIOUS churches one of our most SACRED of days of the year. And I hope it will become that for THIS church as well, and for all of YOU.

And SO, let us NOW, in a spirit of humility and honesty, spend a few moments in SILENCE, during which I invite you to DILIGENTLY search your OWN soul and ADMIT to yourself, AND to GOD, the MANY and VARIOUS ways that you have FALLEN down, that YOU have SINNED by building WALLS of separation between yourself and God, between yourself and others, and even within YOURSELF. And THEN, as the music begins in a few moments, I invite you to come forward, CONFESSING in your heart your SIN. And when you come up here, I invite you to either KNEEL or STAND, and to receive ASHES on your forehead or palm. And MAY these ashes BURY your sin and ALLOW you to have a NEW beginning, a FRESH start, so that you can live YOUR life GOD'S way. Let us now be in a time of silence and self-examination.

SILENT REFLECTION

MUSIC BEGINS...

THE RITUAL OF THE ASHES

PRAYER: O God, our Strength and our Redeemer, we have now been marked with ASHES on our foreheads, our palms, or our hearts. May the truth of these ashes CONFRONT us, and tear down the illusions that keep us from having life in all its fullness. May these ashes BURY our sin and allow us to CHANGE our perspective and to LIVE our lives according to YOUR perspective. Guide us during this holy season of LENT, O God, and make us more and more like JESUS, who is our MODEL as well as our SAVIOR, the One who LOVES us, and who has taught us to pray saying, "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.