Pastoral Letter

February 2021

I remember the day that I received the telephone call…my parents were requesting that while on a trip to Windsor, I stop by Heavenly Rest Cemetery to pick up two urns that would eventually be used for the burial of their ashes. My only other memory of the event was my mixed emotions as I handed each of them a beautiful urn. I recall one of them saying, “happy anniversary to us”. Their humour seemed unusual and distracting.

Today, I know the phone will ring again and it will be time for me to return the urns filled with their ashes to that same cemetery. I must admit, I dread that day…..

Officiating at a graveside service is an honor and a privilege. I must admit that the experience at St. George’s is very different than anything I have ever experienced before. As the chairman of the Anglican Cemetery Board in my previous parish, I was responsible for hundreds of burial sites, a mausoleum, and two columbariums but I had not experienced a scattering garden. Soon after I arrived at St. George’s, I prepared the ashes for someone I had never met. The ashes are placed into an elegant silver vessel so that the family has the opportunity to pour the ashes into the tiny prepared gravesite. I recall feeling sad for the first family and closed my eyes to do the final prayers. More recently, I was preparing the ashes for someone I knew very well, on my way to officiate a ‘scattering’ garden burial with a family I had come to know while their loved one was in palliative care. It was such an honor and privilege to be with them, as children and adults took the vessel and poured the ashes into the ground. I wept….

For many years people have gathered at St. George’s on Ash Wednesday to hear readings from scripture that remind us about our mortality. These same readings affirm our faith in a God that loved us before we were born, and in a promise through Christ that when our earthly journey is complete, our souls move from this planet to the heavenly realm. During this service, faithful members of this parish come forward to receive the blessed ashes that placed on their forehead in the form of a cross; a gentle reminder that ‘you are dust and to dust you shall return’.

This year will be completely different. The liturgical experience will be done through livestream. Therefore, you will not feel the touch on your forehead and the sensation of the sign of the cross being imprinted with ashes as a reminder that life in this world is short but, in the world to come, is eternal. This begs the question: what will this year look like? Yes, we will pray and hear the scripture and even listen to the music, but we will not physically be together. So…you will be offered the gift of a tiny laminated card on which ashes have been imprinted in the sign of the cross. These are available to you by calling the office (519-744-4751) for pick up or mailing so that you are able to carry ‘the cross in your pocket’. I invite you to join us Wednesday morning at 10 am for the Ash Wednesday service. You will receive the link to the service first thing Wednesday morning.

As you are reading the description of the worship service on Wednesday, you might be thinking, “why do we do this unusual thing in our post-modern age?” The worship experience is a gentle reminder of a message about yourself and your destiny. Scripture speaks to this matter in Genesis 2 we read, “the Lord God formed people of dust from the ground”. You see, what we are doing is actually scriptural. The good news comes a little later when we read, “God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”. The God of transformation takes dust and makes humanity. It is a message of hope, promise and new life. We are loaned a body, mind and spirit and in God’s grace we became sacred beings. Herbert O’Driscoll says this so well in his phrase, “divine life dwells within”. Some would say that it is easy to forget the shortness and uncertainty of human life, therefore, in order for us to wake up each morning in anticipation of God’s blessings, we need to be reminded of the importance of this moment right here…right now; for the future in this world is uncertain.

God wants us to succeed, our Lord wants us to achieve…His desire is for our joy, but, if we get preoccupied by our own sense of success, or the delusion that we are self-made, and in control of our own destiny (too often accomplished by instant gratification) and a substitute for joy, we are in spiritual danger. A forgetting that we are created beings with a limited time to embrace experiences of peace, love, hope and joy.

St. Paul wrote to the people of Corinth and asked them to accomplish three tasks. First, “be reconciled with God”. This means we become a living vessel and deliberately place ourselves at the foot of the cross to discern how we may best serve our Lord during this lifetime.

Secondly, Paul asks the people to “work together with God…accepting God’s grace”. This speaks of a real partnership with God whereby we become the hands, voice and feet of Christ in a broken and shattered world. This is a matter of deep and profound prayer as well as authentic dialogue with others to discover practical ways to reach into the lives of those in need.

Third, Paul writes of a need for transformation. It means more than paying lip service to our faith but rather to fully embrace God as Creator, Christ as Saviour, and the Holy Spirit as Source of inspiration. To take this finite life and make every moment count.

I suspect that you would often choose to keep your faith journey private. I understand: it is deeply personal. I recall officiating at a funeral and one of the attendees approached me and said, “ I knew him well: an excellent athlete, a loving spouse, and a dedicated parent but I never knew he was a Christian until attending today’s service. There was so much I could have learned from him if I only knew….”

Scripture tells us that we are to pray, fast, and share our financial resources with the church and other worthy causes. I don’t know if you have ever thought about this but, the issue is our motivation. It can’t be about our own ego but truly responding to the needs of the church community and beyond. Prayer needs to be an intimate dialogue between you and your God. This requires time, focus, and patience.

For those of us who have a preoccupation with food, dare I say, that God is inviting us to step away from that indulgence and spend some time on serving Him. Fasting may well mean taking time to feed the mind or the soul instead of the stomach. In conversation with millennials, they often tell me that they are searching for meaning and purpose. Many receive the blessing of an extraordinary lifetime partner. Many others choose to be blessed with children with the intent of offering them all the love and acceptance that they have received from their families of origin. Still others, complete an education and start at their dream job. In the midst of all this, they tell me they still have not found the meaning and purpose beyond this moment. It is not until we have a conversation about faith that they realize the significance of Herbert O’Driscoll’s words: “we are called to be workers together with God in the present moment, aligning our will with God and receiving God’s grace. This offering of our deepest self to God reaches into the pattern of all that we do.” It is all for the glory of God.

Blessings

Stephen