

Ash Wednesday Homily

David Howells, Grace Church in Scarborough 2013

When you are born your death is born with you.
Your death walks beside you,
just a breath away,
every moment of your life.
How is it we do not see this?
How is it that we turn our eye away?

We see life as all that matters,
and success and joy and careers,
homes and friends
the sum of our being.
But just behind us, quiet as a shadow, a heartbeat away, no more
Is death.

O Mortal Soul.
Mortal like Mortuary, from the French for death,
O Soul that owns truly nothing but its death,
How is it that we turn from that with which we truly walk?

So God gives us ashes.
Once each year we mark ourselves with ashes.
A sign that we are dust, and to dust we shall return.
A sign that we are born and we will die,
and in between are the years of our lives.
We begin with a breath
We end with a breath.
Then we are gone,
like the millions before us,
and the works of our hands are passed to others
and the words of our lips are lost in the echoes of memory.

It is a blessing to know that Life has gone on without us for centuries
and will continue after our dying.
It is a blessing to know our little place in God's wide creation
And a freedom to know the smallness of our part.

The mark of ashes is a sign not of despair or of grim mourning
But a symbol of this part of Truth
That we are only fleeting actors in God's great play of life.
We are small stitches in the tapestry of eternity

But like the gull that swoops across your path, wheels upwards
and screams with opened, yellow beak.

Or like the whale which rises from grey water's unbroken surface
and lifts, turns and crashes down with clouds of spray

Why not,
in this small life,
so delight and thrill your God?
Why not, in our brief passing, make the world a better place,
By one child well loved,
One garden carefully kept,
One smile offered to a stranger,
One act of love towards another,
One heart held open among so many closed,
Faith held, like a yellow buttercup,
in open hands for another to see
and be transfigured by?

To glimps,
In ashes,
The fleeting moment of our being,
Is to glimpse too
The eternity of God

It is to know that this life, so small and sharp and sweet,
arises,
out of God's eternity
like the whale rising from the ocean,
And to God's eternity it shall return
as the whale,
in splendour and joy,
crashes through the surface
to vanish from our sight.

Your heart longs to see more,
but it is the briefness and the rarity
which makes it such a valued gift.

*God of peace,
who taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved,
in quietness and confidence shall be our strength;
by the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray, to your presence,
where we may be still and know that you are God.*

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