

Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

The poet Jane Kenyon often wrote about the uncertainty of living as temporary creatures. The last poem in a collection of her works written just before her death is called "Otherwise."

"I got out of bed," she writes, "on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

“At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.”

There is a palpable sense of beauty in Kenyon’s poem – the beauty imparted by a cut rose, a tiny hummingbird, a human life. Kenyan’s poem is threaded with the sense of beauty that comes with the awareness of impermanence. God’s creations come into being, live for a time and then dissolve. Impermanence makes all God’s creatures, all people, precious and beautiful in God’s eyes.

And we gather this evening to bring that beautiful, cherished pattern to our own awareness. The ashes on our foreheads become symbols of that which we have brought to the front of our minds. At the center of our awareness, we mark the truth of our humble origins, the fleeting nature of our existence and our universal destiny.

We are dust and to dust we shall return.

Even so, there is something more, is there not? Something that embraces the beauty of impermanence and yet does not leave us bereft and downhearted. Something, in short, something that abides.

Dom Gregory Dix was a leading theologian of the 20th century liturgical renewal. In his masterwork, a book titled “The Shape of the

Liturgy,” Dix wrote about some of the situations in which people have turned to the Eucharist for comfort, for courage; in gratitude, in sorrow; for grand state occasions in cathedrals, on ordinary Sundays in tiny rural churches; at weddings and funerals, in prison, in secret during times of religious persecution, for strength in sickness, in thanksgiving for a return to health...”

Dix goes on joyfully for a full two pages describing these fleeting circumstances where people have turned to that which is eternal. Dix is a man abiding in Christ, in love with the Eucharist, where the boundless, timeless and living God is made known to us.

God, our creator, abides. The love of God abides. And the Word of God abides. And because the Word was made human flesh and pitched its tent among us, human flesh is not simply the temporary vehicle that carries us from birth to the dust of death. Here in the kosmic stardust of our human flesh we are also the brothers and sisters of the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ.

Through the abiding presence that we take into ourselves in the Eucharist, we live the fleeting lives God has granted us genuinely and authentically connected to God, the source of our being. Through the life-giving love exchanged in the Eucharist, we cultivate and nourish qualities of the Spirit: truth and loyalty, right-relationship and peace, justice and mercy. Surrounded by the impermanent beauty of God’s creation, with God’s grace, we grow into the full stature of Christ.

And all the while, a steady diet of the blessed bread and wine imparts to our fragile flesh the eternal mystery of the living Christ, the mystery of our lives lived in, *abiding* in, the Christ eternal in our midst.

The infusion of that mysterious feast is the reason we face the uncertainty of living as temporary creatures without losing hope.

At his enthronement as the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams said this: “The one great purpose of the Church’s existence is to share that bread of life; to hold open in its words and actions a place where we can be with Jesus and to be channels for his free, unanxious, utterly

demanding, grown-up love. The Church exists to pass on the promise of Jesus - 'You can live in the presence of God without fear; you can receive from [God's] fullness and set others free from fear and guilt'."

Maybe that is what Kenyon meant when she said one day, life will be otherwise.

Dust we are and to dust we shall return.

"With those words," Karl Rahner once wrote, "we are told everything that we are: nothingness that is filled with eternity; death that teems with life; futility that redeems; dust that is God's life forever."

Works consulted:

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