

Ash Wednesday

Bronnie Ware, is an Australian nurse who spent several years working in palliative care, caring for patients in the last 12 weeks of their lives. She put her observations into a book called "The Top Five Regrets of the Dying".

Ware writes of the phenomenal clarity of vision that people gain at the end of their lives, and how we might learn from their wisdom.

Here are the top five regrets of the dying, as witnessed by Ware:

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.

"This was the most common regret of all. When people realise that their life is almost over and look back clearly on it, it is easy to see how many dreams have gone unfulfilled. Most people had not honoured even a half of their dreams and had to die knowing that it was due to choices they had made, or not made. Health brings a freedom very few realise, until they no longer have it."

2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.

"This came from every male patient that I nursed. They missed their children's youth and their partner's companionship. Women also spoke of this regret, but as most were from an older generation, many of the female patients had not been breadwinners. All of the men I nursed deeply regretted spending so much of their lives on the treadmill of a work existence."

3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.

"Many people suppressed their feelings in order to keep peace with others. As a result, they settled for a mediocre existence and never became who they were truly capable of becoming. Many developed illnesses relating to the bitterness and resentment they carried as a result."

4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.

"Often they would not truly realise the full benefits of old friends until their dying weeks and it was not always possible to track them down. Many had become so caught up in their own lives that they had let golden friendships slip by over the years. There were many deep regrets about not giving friendships the time and effort that they deserved. Everyone misses their friends when they are dying."

5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

"This is a surprisingly common one. Many did not realise until the end that happiness is a choice. They had stayed stuck in old patterns and habits. The so-called 'comfort' of familiarity overflowed into their emotions, as well as their physical lives. Fear of change had them pretending to others, and to their selves, that they were content, when deep within, they longed to laugh properly and have silliness in their life again."

Sometimes we describe our spiritual or emotional lives by saying "I'm in a bad place right now." We seem to intuitively know that there is another place, a better place. Regardless of how they come about the changes of life, it seems, leave us wondering, "Where is my place in life?" When we place this question in the context of the liturgy for Ash Wednesday, we are reminded of our place: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return". This is not to say that we put in our place. To remember that we are dust is not a negative, not a put down. It is not an insult or a judgment. It means we look at the reality of who we are, where we have been, and where we are going. It does not mean that we are nothing but dirt. Instead we are being asked to remember that our life begins and ends in God. We are to recall that God scooped together handfuls of sacred dust and breathed God's own life into the dust. He breathed us into existence. God has chosen us to be the containers of His divine breath, His divine life.

As we look at your own life, listen to the stories of others, the regrets of the dying and our own regrets, we realize that most of us have at some point found our place in life based on what others say to us, based on what others think about us, based on others expectations for us, based on the presence or absence of someone else in our life.

We tend to forget, ignore, and sometimes even deny our dustiness. And when we do, we end up practicing our piety before others in order to be seen by them. Not because we are bad, but because we have lost our place in life. Perhaps we never even knew we had a place. So we spend our lives trying to create a place for ourselves. We live our lives on the outside. Our identity and relationships become externalized. Other people become objects. Separation and disintegration characterize our existence. And pretty soon everything seems out of place.

Jesus recognizes how easily we can lose our place. He is warning us about living our lives on the outside in order to be seen by others. The risk is that we will turn life more and more into an activity to be seen, judged, even admired by others. When that happens our place in life changes according to the opinions or life of someone other than our Creator and Savior.

In today's gospel Jesus is calling us to the interior life. He is asking us to live life from the inside out. He is asking us to move from the outer world to the inner world. He is asking us to let go of living our lives before others in order to be seen by them. That letting go is our Lenten discipline.

When we move into that place with God we no longer depend on others to give us our identity. We no longer depend on others to give us our place in life. In that secret place we remember that we are dust. We begin to see that our identity, who we are, is who we are in God.

Despite the disappointments in our relationships, our working careers, the children who grow up and move away, the frailty of our bodies, the pain of our losses, the changes and chances of life, the fear of the unknown – we are, we always have been, and we always will be the beloved sons and daughters of God.

Today the Church invites us to the observance of a holy Lent by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. This is the journey back to our dustiness.

These are the practices that point us to that secret place where God resides.

“To dust you shall return” is not God's threat or punishment. And it is not simply a statement about bodily decay after death. It is a statement of God's faithfulness to us. It is a statement of God's love and desire for us. It is the promise of resurrected life.

The first thing most people do as soon as they leave the Ash Wednesday service is to wash off the ashes. But before doing that let them rub deep into our being. They are our place in life.

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”