

These are the words (at least one option) that the Church gives us for the distribution of ashes on Ash Wednesday, and are thus among the first words that the Church gives us for Lent. At the head or beginning of Lent we are told: Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return. These are not just arbitrary words or just something to say while distributing ashes. Our Lord, through His Church, is telling us to do something. The first word is: Remember. This remembering is not just recalling some fact or piece of information. Remember here means to call it to mind and think about it, ponder it over, let it settle deeply into your mind.

What is it that we are to ponder from the very beginning of the season of Lent? That we are dust and to dust we shall return. Does that sound harsh or morbid or maybe just too frightening? Is that the reason our Lord speaks to us? To be harsh or morbid or to simply scare people for no reason? If our Lord calls us to think about this, it is to bring about some good for us. What is that good? Rather than something crushing or depressing, could it actually be something liberating? Well, let's start "remembering" and see.

Let's begin this "remembering" by thinking about all of the famous or wealthy people throughout history. Famous athletes would be an example. Everyone at the time knows them, they are in advertisements, and so on. But within a generation or two after they retire, hardly anyone knows them, much less gets excited about them. Most young football fans, for example, have no idea who the most popular NFL players were when I was a kid. Same thing with actors who were very famous in their time. I have heard of some actor, of days gone by, by the name of Clark Gable. I don't know anything about him, I have never seen any of his movies, and I'm not inclined to seek them out. Yet in his time, he was apparently all it. Now he is dead, gone, and largely forgotten. Same thing with powerful rulers or politicians. Most of us can't even name many of our own past presidents, much less powerful political figures of the past. Take Tiberius or Diocletius – the whole world shook when these Roman emperors spoke because of their great power. Yet they now lay in some grave somewhere, just like the lowest of the lowly, almost entirely forgotten. Ah but the wealthy – now that's where it is. That's "forever." Same thing, they too end up in a 3 by 8 foot hole in the ground, no different than the poorest of the poor, with other people now in possession of whatever stuff they had. The opulence of the past is gone. The same will be true for us. This is an undeniable reality. It is blatantly obvious.

Now sometimes people will try to circumvent this reality by telling themselves things like: oh people will remember me or this will have lasting influence or my children will enjoy what I have left behind and I find that satisfying. So what? Even if that is true, there is no way you will enjoy it or even be aware of it after death. Dead is dead. Death is absolute in terms of the end of this world and this life. And it's the case for everybody, no one can escape it. Even if it is true, your children face the same fate – the same 3 by 8 hole. Even if they derive some enjoyment from what you've left behind, it will only be for a short time. Then what? What about the super-wealthy? In a few short generations their wealth will be in the hands of people they never knew or even imagined and regardless of who has it, they won't know about it, they will derive no satisfaction of any kind from it. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes. In terms of this life and this world, no matter how much scrambling I do to build up my own little empire in this world, everyone ends up with the same inheritance – a box to lay in and a very small, 3x8 piece of real estate, and even that I won't be aware of.

Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. Well at this point I might say: I don't really want to remember. Everything is for nought, it's pointless, life is pointless, whatever I do it's all in vain, there's no point in doing anything, it's hopeless. This truth, this reality, is undeniable; everybody knows it, no matter how much they try to avoid it.

Is there any way through this? Is there any reason to go on? Well suppose, after really "remembering," you find a wise man and tell him all of this with some shred of hope that he will enlighten the situation for you and thus be pulled out of despair. The wise man listens patiently and appears to be quite undisturbed by this reality. After you finally finish, he says something like this: Now listen, buckaroo, the trouble is that your whole thinking is backwards, upside down, and inside out. You're blindly pursuing what amounts to a handful of dust which will be blown away with the slightest puff of wind, and you're acting like this handful of dust is all there

is. You're like somebody worshipping a roll of toilet paper. What are you thinking? How can you possibly believe that that's going to get you anywhere? No wonder you're all bummed out – you should be.

First of all, the wise man says, it is true that your death will be an absolute end to this life and this world for you. There is nothing that has gone here or that will go on here that you will be able to enjoy like you do now. But it's also true that you never really die, at least not in the sense that you're thinking of death. Yes, at some point your soul will separate from your body and your body will become lifeless. But that's not the end of your existence. Once a person is created, their existence never ends. Your mind, your consciousness – your soul – all of this remains very much alive even after physical death. Not only that but this world will, at some point, end entirely and at that time, not only will your soul still be alive but you will be reunited with your body. So even physical death – even the grave – is only temporary. Everybody knows this, or at least you should know it.

Now, the wise man continues, the key is what state will you be in when you experience physical death, which is also the state you'll be in when you get your body back. Not everyone will be in a good state, it depends on what you do and don't do in this life, it will depend on your interior state, your state of virtue. It's a good thing you started remembering otherwise you would've just blindly kept running after your handful of dust, trading it for true fulfillment that is indeed forever. You would have wasted your whole life and ended up in a bad state, absolutely miserable, forever. Are you a dullard, the wise man asks? What kind of deal is that? Do you realize how short this part of your existence is and you wanted to just to ignore that for some passing trinkets? Death is dead, man, these trinkets count for nothing.

In fact, ladies and gentlemen, a wise man did come and tell all of us exactly that. He is known as Jesus Christ. And what He says cannot be other than true because He also happens to be God. Do you believe Him? You can only answer yes by seeking out what He has revealed and following it with utmost diligence. Anything else is a practical answer of no.

Let us come back now to the question of: is this remembering a hindrance to my happiness or is it, in fact, the beginning of happiness, a great unburdening? Think about how much energy is expended on anxiety, envy, pride, wrath, *all* of which come from over-prioritizing the things of this life and this world. Think about how much misery these things cause now. If the passing things of this life and this world were put into their true perspective by: remembering you are dust and to dust you shall return, all of these stressors and causes of unhappiness would largely dissipate. You would actually be peaceful. The fact is that you simply won't care that much about all of the things that cause so much pain if you do this remembering. When our Lord said: come to Me all who are burdened and I will give you rest, do you think He did not mean what He said? This is how we come to Him. But that's not the end of it, that's only a beginning. This remembering does not just bring peace and freedom from much interior angst in the here and now, it also *opens the way* to relation with the Lord, to becoming the son or daughter you are meant to be, it opens the way to being in your Father's Kingdom. This "remembering," *is* something good, after all – that's why our Lord presents it to us.

In the space left, let's come back briefly to the season of Lent. Just like Advent is not preparation for the birth of Christ (Christmas) *per se*, since His birth has already occurred, so Lent is not preparation for the Resurrection *of Christ* (Easter) since that too has already occurred – and you don't prepare for things that have already happened. That is not to say, though, that Advent and Christmas have no connection. The focus of Advent is on the second coming of Christ, which is connected to His first coming (Christmas). Likewise, Lent and Easter are also connected, and not just connected but intimately connected. Easter is a reminder that we are meant for the Resurrection to Life – a glorified body, in our true home, our Father's house, our Father's Kingdom. This is our true, ultimate destiny. But we have to choose to get there, a choice that entails substantial sacrifice of self. "Lent" is the path to travel to get there and each individual person has to choose whether or not they will do it. It's not cheap, easy, and automatic, but nothing worth having is. There were great turnouts for Ash Wednesday. But remember, Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent, not the end. Go forward with all your strength.

*God bless you, Fr Kuhn*