

SERMON 834

Ash Wednesday

March 5, 2014

935th Week as Priest

761st Week at St Dunstan's

26th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

PARADISE LOST

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” said the LORD God in the Garden of Eden. The human beings had disobeyed God, and they were being cast out of Paradise. God’s judgment of Adam and Eve was harsh and final. There would be no second chance. Paradise was lost to them, and to all human beings from that point forward, and there would be no going back to the Garden.

There were other punishments as well—for the woman, pain in child birth and some kind of inner conflict regarding her simultaneous desire for and disgust with the man (which neither he nor I will ever understand); and for the man, hard work by the sweat of his brow, and an uncooperative universe in which to toil; and for both of them, death.

This was the first understanding of Paradise Lost and inevitable death by the People of God, and whether you believe the literalism of the

sacred story, in our enlightened and much improved existence in the 21st Century, it is yet true: Life is hard, and we shall all die.

But this fact—that life is hard and we shall all die—is not nearly as important to me as the question it begs, which is **WHY** is life hard, and **WHY** do we all have to die?

This is the question that I wish to address, and in my mind, at least, it is the question of the **Human Condition**—not “is life hard?” or “will we die?” but **WHY**, **WHY**, and **WHY**?

Many theologians believe that the only way to discover truth about **Almighty God**, Creator of the Universe, Sovereign Lord of Life, is to examine what **God** is *not*. Their thought is that we cannot truly know **God** any more than we can stare **God** in the face and live to tell about it, or stand in **God**’s holy presence and brag about it later. **God** is simply too great, too holy, too *other* for us to bear. In the **Book of Job**, **God** has tested Job severely, and poor Job, a righteous man, is broken and battered—but he does not lose faith in **God**. **He** does ask the question, “Why?” **And** here is **God**’s answer ...

The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? **Gird** up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the

morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings
shouted for joy?

The **LORD** continues asking such questions for several more chapters,
and finally poor Job, humiliated and humbled, replies,

“I know that you can do all things, O **LORD**,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
‘**Hear**, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me.’
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.”

He has his answer: The **LORD** is too marvelous to question, too great
to second-guess, too perfect to correct. “Life is hard and we will all
die.” Job accepts his fate and repents in dust and ashes. **But** notice,
please, that he also maintains his faith and repents his pride and
presumption. **And** he is given new life—life that is still hard, and
death which is certain—but he is given new life.

Saint Paul discovered a still more excellent way, a way that was not of
his own making, but of the making of **God**. At a point of despair and
agony not unlike that of Job, Paul exclaimed, “Wretched man that I

am, who will save me from this body of death?” The answer, he discovered was Jesus Christ, him and him alone. John would write later in his gospel, “In the fullness of time, God sent his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Life would still be hard, and death would remain a certainty. But just as certain would be the promise of eternal life. That is our “sure and certain hope,” as the Prayer Book says. And that, I believe, is the only way that we can face the harsh realities of life, and the certainty of death.

As for why, I cannot say, although I have come to believe with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength that the question has more to do with **HOW** we live and **HOW** we die, rather than **WHY**. And even more, I am fully convinced that we would not **LOVE GOD**, or **LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR**, if we never were to die. We could always put it off, you see, until tomorrow. We wouldn’t have to bother with the trouble of **COMPASSION** or the inconvenience of **LOVE**, or the responsibility of **CARING** if life were easy and we lived forever.

And now I can accept that life is hard and death is certain—but I am not afraid and I am not discouraged, because, as Job said, “I know that my Redeemer lives.” **AMEN.**

969 words