Ash Wednesday
February 27, 1974
Rolling Meadows, Illinois

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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 6: 1: BEWARE OF PRACTICING YOUR PIETY BEFORE MEN IN ORDER TO BE SEEN BY THEM; FOR THEN YOU WILL HAVE NO REWARD FROM YOUR FATHER WHO IS IN HEAVEN.

ASH WEDNESDAY stands for REPENTANCE - - for a REPENTANT LIFE. ASH WEDNESD says that you CANNOT STAND before the THRICE HOLY GOD in your OWN RIGHT or by your OWN VIRTUES. ASH WEDNESDAY reminds us that as the CHILDREN of ADAM we are ALL destined for DEATH and the GRAVE. ASH WEDNESDAY holds up before each one of US the REALITY of our MORTALITY - - "ASHES TO ASHES TO ASHES AND DUST TO DUST" - - "YOU ARE DUST, AND TO THE DUST YOU SHALL RETURN" - - -"IN ADAM, ALL DIE."

The GREATEST, most VEXING QUESTION ever to CONFRONT EVERY HUMAN BEING is this: "If a man DIE, shall he LIVE AGAIN?" This is the question which the LORD HIMSELF put to Ezekiel in his VISION of the VALLEY of the DRY BONES: "SON OF MAN, CAN THESE BONES LIVE?" ASH WEDNESDAY replies with a RESOUNDING, "YES!" ASH WEDNESDAY says that there IS HOPE and there IS A FUTURE - - - beyond ANYTHING that we could ever DREAM or EXPECT! ASH WEDNESDAY says that in the MIDST of our WORLD of SIN, and SUFFERING, and DEATH, "GOD GAVE HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON THAT WHOSOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHOULD NOT PERISH BUT HAVE EVERLASTING LIFE!"

"FOR GOD SENT ~~THE~~ HIS SON INTO THE WORLD, NOT TO COMDEMN THE WORLD, BUT THAT THE WORLD MIGHT BE SAVED." St. Paul in tonight's EPISTLE, says it so beautifully: "FOR OUR SAKE GOD MADE HIM TO BE SIN WHO KNEW NO SIN, SO THAT IN HIM WE MIGHT BECOME THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD."

Our PROBLEM - - YOURS and MINE - - is that we somehow always want to SAVE OURSELVES. We put our HOPE, our CONFIDENCE, and our TRUST in the things that WE DO. We want to RECEIVE CREDIT for our GOOD WORKS. And in the process, everything that CHRIST DID - - His BITTER SUFFERING, and DEATH, and GLORIOUS RESURRECTION for US - - His FORGIVENESS - and LIFE, and SALVATION - - - - this is all shoved into the BACKGROUND.

Our whole CULTURE emphasizes this. At least in MY HOME, we give REWARDS for every "A" that the CHILDREN bring home from school. In BUSINESS and INDUSTRY it is the same way. "WORK HARD, BE FAITHFUL - - - and you will be PROMOTED!" You can go right along the LINE - - - with the MILITARY, for example, with all of its STRIPS and MEDALS, ending with the PURPLE HEART - - - or in BOY SCOUTS or GIRL SCOUTS, or CAMP FIRE GIRLS, or what have you - - - - there is ALWAYS a REWARD!

And the real CRUNCHER comes when we TRY to TRANSLATE THIS into our RELATIONSH with GOD! Sometimes it comes in terms of our COMPLAINING: "God, WHY does this have to happen to ME? I have tried to be FAITHFUL. I have tried to LIVE the CHRISTIAN LIFE. Now WHY should I have to SUFFER this way?" Can you IMAGINE JESUS CHRIST - - the HOLY SON of GOD - - being TEMPTED to ASK THAT VERY SAME QUESTION?

Or it COMES, as our GOSPEL LESSON says, in our "PRACTICING OUR PIETY BEFORE MEN IN ORDER TO BE SEEN BY THEM." We always want CREDIT for what WE DO and HOW we BEHAVE. Jesus says that that is ALL RIGHT so long as it is between YOU and your HEAVENLY FATHER. But the IMPLICATION, obviously, is that NO ONE ELSE should SEE YOU DOING THAT. It has to be "IN SECRET" between YOU and your FATHER in HEAVEN. In other words, don't stand out there "WAVING the FLAG" to show ~~anybody~~ everybody else how HOLY and RIGHTEOUS and PIOUS YOU ARE.

When you give ALMS - - let nobody else know EXCEPT your FATHER in HEAVEN. When you PRAY - go into your CLOSET - and ~~say~~ pray to your FATHER in SECRET - - when you FAST - don't make a BIG DISPLAY about it - do that with your FATHER in

HEAVEN.

Our CHRISTIAN LIFE of GIVING, and PRAYING, and ABSTAINING has to be between US and our HEAVENLY FATHER. What Jesus is really saying is this: "IF YOU HAVE IT, DON'T FLAUNT IT." Don't go around with your HEAD UP and your CHIN UP saying to everybody else, "LOOK HOW HOLY AND GOOD I AM." Rather, let that be between YOU and your FATHER who is in HEAVEN.

ASH WEDNESDAY says that if we can make it to the THRONE of GOD by our OWN POWER and WILL, and , and GOOD WORKS - - - then we do NOT NEED JESUS CHRIST. Then He goes to the CROSS in VAIN! We DON'T NEED a SAVIOR because we are our OWN SAVIORS. We can MANAGE EVERYTHING by our own BROWNIE POINTS or MERIT BADGE and the BIG EXCLAMATION POINTS that we put behind our OWN LIFE. There is then NO NEED to SUFFER and DIE with Him - - to FOLLOW HIM to HIS CROSS - - to be CRUCIFIED, DEAD and BURIED.

Either you see yourself THERE - - or there is NO HOPE - - and there is NO LIFE - - and there is NO FUTURE! CHRIST - and HIS CROSS - and HIS GLORIOUS RESURRECTION - - - -

they have to be EVERYTHING FOR US! WITH HIM it is either "EVERYTHING AT ALL, or NOTHING AT ALL!" Amen.