

Sermon during the confessional service on Ash Wednesday (Chapel of St.Timothy at LTS)

Remember that you are dust + and to dust you shall return + *“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light.”* (Mat 6:16-22 NIV)

Dear friends of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ: Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. That is the result of our sin and the wrath of God over it. Death is nothing nice. It's probably the hardest bone we've got to chew, the toughest battle we have to fight and the most bitter pill we have to swallow. No question. I saw a man die years ago. It literally took days and even weeks. Heavily dosed by morphine, delirious with dark and morbid phantasies and groaning, sighing and croaking it was a ugly sight. And when dead, man is a sorry sight, worse than any living hag or wrench. And we're all going to die. No matter whether you are a wild and battle strong Zulu warrior in the Msinga hills or whether your just a pen-pusher in one of the many offices around town. Death comes to all of us. And you'll face him alone. Nobody is going to be going that way with you – no lovely stewardess to keep you company and not even a terrible taxi driver or dirty train stoker either. That trip you're going to do alone. So get your house in order. Sort out your matters. Get things straightened out. Throw out the rubbish. Get rid of excess baggage, get the right ticket to ride, the proper travelling guide, go the best way, take along a lunch pack and make sure you've got some for seconds and thirds too and then do strive for the real treasures of life, the heavenly treasures practically – the holy grail – the lost ark – the unicorn - the real thing. Finally make friends with the ferry man so that he drops you off at the right place – the heavenly mansions - and not at the other end, hell. That would really be a rotten deal. The art of good living and especially of good dying is something the wise amongst all people strive for – ars moriendi. It's practiced in all high cultures of humanity of the East and the West. Remember the Pharaos with the pyramids and the embalmed mummies like Thuthankamun or the cremation rites in Hinduism - Antyetsi – on the Ganges. Even the Zulu have elaborate traditions and rites and rituals to accompany the living dead into the spiritual realm. Even the bushman have something of this. Grave robbers have looted the pyramids in the deserts of N.Africa and the deepest jungle of Central America. It was in vain, for

nothing, all is lost to them. Reason enough to look dour faced and all wrinkled up even as the mummies do or to sing “Gone with the wind” and “Swallowed by the waves...” It’s all vanity. For nothing. It is the truth, that we can’t help ourselves and we on our own can’t go to heaven whatever we try, we don’t have the power, the ingenuity, wisdom or strength. We must get help with that. What we do or don’t do, what we eat or don’t eat/drink/smoke/wear or practice doesn’t get us into heaven. IX does! He alone. He uses his means of grace to forgive our sins, heal our diseases and grant us life and salvation

Thankfully we know this. We’re blessed with the knowledge of truth. The treasures of heaven are ours. Christ is with us. Immanuel. We’ve been saved by our Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit in our Baptism long ago. See, Baptism is also an initiation into the death and dying of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ, but it is also an inclusion, engrafting and incorporation into his victorious resurrection, the new godly life in him and thus eternal blessedness and joy with him as the end all and be all of everything. He the one and only God, the highest good, the most lovely light and star, the uncreated creator and blessed saviour, Lord of Lords and king of Kings. In holy Baptism we have been unified with IX. He is in us and we in him – one happy union, one cake and inseparable body – he the head, we the limbs. Wherever he goes, we go. He’s our ticket to ride. He’s our ferryman. He’s our means and end to life and salvation, the nourishment, most precious treasure and highest good – all in all. With him nothing is impossible. Nothing is left out. Nothing is missing. All is there – and we are completely content and at peace. That is why we can say no to this and yes to that as the situation demands and our neighbour needs it. See, if you say you’re going to eat only half the plate – then somebody else can get the other. If you say, you only are going to use R550 for yourself, then you’ve got R50 for the collection, for alms for the poor, for those who need it most and for that which needs to be done in the church. Fasting is about saying thanks to God for all his good gifts and making it clear to yourself that you’ve got more than enough, you’ve got something to spare, you’ve got something to share and to give to those, who need it even more than you yourself do - be it space, time or just loving care, kindness and active goodness. So don’t look so grumpy and sour, but rather wear a smile, show that your loved by God and that you know it, count your blessings and be willing to share them with your family, friends, neighbours and those, who knock on your door – needing your help and care – a bit from the masters table. So wear your shiny shoes, comb your hair and smile – you’re beloved and richly gifted by God. You’re an heir of heaven, prince & princess, the treasures of heaven are yours, the highest good is yours too – God himself is for you, who can be against you. Death no longer has power over you. Death is conquered by Christ – and because he lives you shall live also. That’s the gospel truth. That’s yours to share. This is the true treasure of the Church. Don’t just keep it for yourself, rather share and give to those, who need it still.

Now we've come to Confession. It's time to confess that we're still looking for earthly treasures and that we've often forgotten our true treasures in heaven, not esteemed them enough and not lived as if we are truly and richly blessed by God, but rather shortchanged, discriminated against and even severely wronged and mistreated. Have we forgotten our sin? Have we forgotten that we deserve much worse and that we are but dust and will return to dust also? This confession gives us a chance to reflect on our true treasures and count our countless blessings, but even more our Lord Jesus Christ is here with us and grants us forgiveness of all our sins – the misguided treasure hunting, the wasted time and money and energy and all our vain pursuits and failed endeavors. He forgives our shortsightedness, our blindness for his goodness and favour, our lustful craving and longing eyes for created and passing and temporal and worldly things he forgives too – for our unholy desire to be God ourselves. He died for this. Showed us, what we men are really like: Ecce homo + See – the man! And he did that for us – suffer, die and be buried – for us and in our stead. Thus he forgives our lack of joy and gratefulness for his goodness and mercy that is new every morning. He overcomes our fear of death, he carries us through we're we are short of breath and lack strength, ability and are without the necessary will power. He grants us confidence and peace that passes all understanding. He forgives us all our sins and whatever hinders and keeps us from him. Thus he helps us to the new life and to overcome this old one. No longer sour and grim, but joyful and grateful by his grace and blessing. Amen. The peace of the Lord be with you always + Amen.

Hymn 418: *O Lord, throughout these 40 days ...*