

From Psalm 103: As a father cares for his children, * so does the LORD care for those who fear him./ For he himself knows whereof we are made; * he remembers that we are but dust.

God remembers. God remembers whereof we are made.
God remembers that we are dust.

Remember. That is one of the prayers of the ancient church. Remember. As if God needed reminding. As if God needed a little help. Remember, they said.

Remember Lord your one holy church. Remember all who have fallen asleep in the hope of Christ and those who are known to you alone. Remember.

If you ever look at the prayers of the people in Eucharistic Prayer D (which is the earliest Eucharistic prayer we have), or if you have studied the ancient prayers of the church on your own, you notice that they usually begin with the word remember. Remember us, Lord, not as we deserve in our sinfulness. Remember us as you know and love us, in your Son Jesus Christ.

So too went one of the great prayers of Lent, written fifteen hundred years ago by Gregory the Great, when he

served as Bishop of Rome. This was from his prayers for Ash Wednesday:

Remember, Lord, though frail we be, in your own image we were made. Therefore, we pray you, Lord forgive; so when our wanderings here shall cease, we may with you for ever live, in love and unity and peace.

And it wasn't just Gregory or the earliest Christians who thought that God needed a few reminders, like an overworked CEO with sticky notes all over the desk. The prophets of old sometimes began or ended with those same reminders. Remember, Lord, we are your people. We are your people and the sheep of your pasture. Remember and do not forget us, o Lord our God.

So today, as people are thinking about what they are giving up and taking on, or as people are thinking about mortality and eternity, I want to think about why we remind God what it means to be human.

Ash Wednesday sometimes reminds me of one of the

great characters of twentieth century Christianity. He was a fictional character in one of C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* books, but he really embodies the meaning of what it means to be human.

We meet Eustace at the beginning of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* with the memorable opening line, "There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it." Eustace was arrogant and self-centered, the kind who probably didn't have many friends and didn't care that he didn't have many friends. He was cruel to the other children, and when the voyage they were on landed at a deserted island, it was no real surprise when Eustace headed off alone.

Some of you will remember that the real surprise came when Eustace, while wandering this island, came across a dragon's treasure pile. It was full of gold and coins and jewels, and Eustace wanted it all for himself. He played in his newfound treasure until he became tired. He lay down to sleep on top of the gold and coins and jewels, so no one could take it from him. Then he woke up the next

morning and realized he had turned into a dragon. All of that treasure that he had wanted for himself somewhat innocently had transformed him so badly.

Then the arrogant child loses his haughtiness. He is afraid of his own reflection in the water. He is afraid of his loneliness. He tries to remind his friends he is. Remember me! He shouted, but in dragon-speak. Remember, I am your friend Eustice. And even when they did remember him, they couldn't help. The boat couldn't support the weight of dragon. They couldn't support—literally or figuratively—the monster he had become. So there he sat, alone and left behind, crying out for someone to remember the innocent child inside.

It is a dramatic story, another sobering reminder on this day, marked by ashes and repentance and mortality. You and I aren't monsters, at least most of us aren't. But we do know what C.S. Lewis means when he talks about how each of us, if given the right opportunity, goes to sleep one night and wakes up not recognizing the person we have become. We remember who we are on

the inside. Sometimes we need God to remember, too.

Psalm 51 lies at the center of Ash Wednesday's liturgy. While each of us is marked with ashes, the choir will be chanting those familiar words, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." Those words are rooted in another dramatic story of a man who accidentally became a monster. It was King David to whom we attribute this poetic cry of repentance. His words of penitence are rooted in the story of how he slept with a woman named Bathsheba, and then had her husband—Uriah the Hittite—moved to the front line of battle so he might be killed. Later David is reminded of what he has done, and he is reminded of what he has become. He also became a monster without realizing it.

It is only fair to pause here for a minute and admit that these are dramatic stories, and I am not offering them for comparison's sake! Sometimes, unintentionally, all of this talk of sin and mortality reminds some of us of our own low self-worth in dangerous ways, and that is not at all what I mean.

Ash Wednesday is not a holiday to wonder how bad we are. It suggests a universality of our humanity, how each of us as humans lives in a constant reality where sin and death and redemption and hope are always comingled, and we must be intentional as people created in the image of God, of remembering who we are.

These ashes are a gentle reminder of what is already true for us as humans, that as specks of dust we need reminders of our mortality, as well as reminders of divine possibilities and grace. As specks of dust we need to take time and remember who we are and what is important in life. And these ashes are a gentle reminder to God, too. Remember, God, that you made us... and that we are yours... despite so many things. Remember that we are dust. Remember we are your beloved dust.

I think I have come to understand this unique drama of repentance and remembering on the part of God during the last few years differently. I love my daughter Ella and think that she is absolutely wonderful. And yet... it

didn't take long to realize she was going to have a mind of her own. Who knew that keeping on a pair of shoes could turn into a herculean task? And in a way, I know that I am the adult and she is the child, and that I am the responsible father and she is the daughter, but sometimes in our own little drama—as she takes off her shoes for the fourth time—I admit that I need a moment to remember what is important in life! And sometimes I need help. Sometimes she has to remind me. As I am laid out on the floor of the car, picking up her shoes again, she smiles and says, “I love you, daddy. Remember you are the best dad in the whole world.”

“Yes,” I say, putting on her shoes again, “I remember.”

You may remember the dramatic scene in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* in which Eustace becomes a boy again. As it turns out, he never ceased being a boy. The boy was just hidden deep inside. Aslan the lion, who (you remember) represents Christ in the drama, comes and forces his claw deep into the skin of the dragon. Eustace screams because it hurts so much, but

Aslan goes deeper. And he goes deeper... neither to hurt nor to punish... but because he remembers the boy deep inside. Despite the pain, Aslan until he finds the boy in there, and together they shed the monster skin. And Eustace couldn't have done it on his own. Shedding that skin required a savior, someone willing to dig deep. And digging so deep required, I suspect, remembering the boy deep inside. A boy whom he loved, despite the problems. A boy for whom he had given his very life.

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