

Remember that thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return. However familiar these words are, it can be rattling to hear them addressed to us directly, to feel the cold coarseness of ash pressed on tender skin. Yet today is a day to hear and be marked by these words – to look long into our mortality, not to shrink from life, but to drink of it more deeply, to taste its sweetness all the more.

We may think that death is of all things most to be dreaded. We may fear that if we acknowledge our own death's certainty, we somehow invite its arrival. But the wisdom of the church is that there is something deeply healthy, deeply purifying and sanctifying, about looking our own death straight in the eye on this day. Why is that? It is not only to acknowledge truth – that each of us gathered here will not be sitting here always. It is because the process of becoming true to ourselves can be catalysed, so we reach it earlier in life, and live out of it the longer.

The trouble is, we think we have time. Today's words, telescoping to life's sunset, focus the mind. Focusing conveys the freedom to relinquish that which is inessential. If we only had a short while to live, how would we? Today we permit this question gently to arise.

To give one example, think of possessions. I take a lot of trips. One night I was packing and for some bizarre reason a thought flashed through – how would I pack for death? And I realized with glee I wouldn't need to take anything at all. No packing required!

Ash Wednesday offers us space – space to make an authentic purification and seek mercy. Today's liturgy doesn't grovel with horrified overestimation at our pet foibles. Rather, it helps us clarify our points of true light, so we bother to let go of habits we have outgrown, or forgotten to amend. We take the trouble to clean our lives of things that no longer belong. Like panning for gold - you rinse away not-gold.

May this be the spirit of whatever you give up – or take up – this Lent. For what will most matter as we come to the end of life is, did we love well? There are not many other questions. Our practices Monday to Saturday throughout Lent help us to rinse away the dross. And we call upon God to shore up our true beauty, treasure – now.

Christians believe in life after death, in the resurrection of the body. We say it together in the creed. And what that means is that death is not an end, but a transition: into the flooding intensity of God's love. Christians use Lent to start learning to make our transition, so we are well adept when the hour comes.