

**ASH WEDNESDAY '20 A – DEEP CYCLE: DEEP CALL
PSALM 32:1-11 & MATTHEW 6:1-6 & 16-21**

Welcome to worship this evening. The guys at Wagga Motors washed my car the other day. It's part of what they do I guess when they perform the Inspection required for me to renew the Registration. I have a certificate that says "Pass" on a small number of superficial safety tests...and the outside is clean. I'm not sure they raised the hood...and I know they didn't do anything to the engine. The most important part of the car went untouched. I wonder what "pass" really means then? Not complaining...just curious...

Most of us go through our days just like that. We don't spend much time addressing the real internal issues...the things that take hold of our hearts...selfishness, pride, bitterness, impatience, anger...you can make your own list...the stuff of which Jesus says, *For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, slander, false testimony. These are what defile a person...Mt 15:19-20a*

God has called us together tonight so that in His presence & in the presence of His people we can do more than wash the outside. The season of Lent is about getting out of the way so our Heavenly Father can reach deep inside & make us again in his image...touch the untouched places of our hearts with the Spirit & recreate us in the likeness of Jesus who so fully became one of us that he became our sin so we might become God's righteous children.

Tonight the Father continues to transform from the inside out so that our capacity for his presence is increased & our witness to his world is strengthened. Heb 4:12-13 "*For the word of God is alive & powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul & spirit, between joint & marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts & desires. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked & exposed before his eyes, & he is the one to whom we are accountable.*"

It is in that deep forgiveness, deep renewal deep transformation that we find the true depth of love in the one who gave himself for us & rose to rule over all things in grace mercy & peace and who pours out his joy on all the Father's children.

Let's Pray... Heavenly Father you have spoken to us saying "*Turn to me with your whole heart; with fasting, with weeping, & with mourning. Rend your hearts not your garments*" We turn now seeking forgiveness & restoration – longing for healing & hope – searching for meaning & purpose in our lives & the lives of those we love. By your Son deliver us from the power of the evil one. Save us from sin & death. Breathe new life into us & strengthen our wills to surrender our lives solely to you. We pray through Jesus Christ...Amen

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It's strangely ironic to be standing here tonight holding this bowl of ashes. Not a fortnight ago we were praying that our entire state wouldn't come out of this summer looking like this. We were praying for friends & family & neighbours & strangers whose lives & livelihoods were just one gust of wind from ashes. Many of us literally wept at the thought of the people & animals flocks & herds & whole communities watching everything they'd ever known as home become ash. So tonight, to be here voluntarily smearing these on our foreheads...like I said...strangely ironic.

Or maybe not...there's nothing like a raging out of control unstoppable inferno to remind us how fragile & powerless we truly are. There is nothing like a force of nature...fire, flood, drought, dust storm, cyclone, earthquake, tsunami or tornado... to make us take stock of how impotent we are in this universe of things beyond our control. While I'd NEVER say a disaster or a disease is "good" for us...I WILL say that in all things if we look closely enough & listen deeply enough we might just hear God's voice underneath it all...see His hand at work His Spirit moving in the midst...

"Remember you are dust & to dust you shall return." It doesn't take a tragedy for me to remember that...I just watch the natural diminishing/deterioration of my own body ...& yours...I remember not only THAT truth, but also from where it comes. This is the fruit of human sinfulness. This is the result of human rebellion against God. This is what we look like as those who have decided we can be the boss of our own existence; when we tell ourselves the lie "I am the master of my fate & the captain of my soul." (Wm Ernest Henley/Invictus) *No one is righteous. Not even one. No one is truly wise; no one seeks God. All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good; not a single one.* – Rom 3:9-13

Here's the real killer...nobody is to blame for this but me. Ever since Adam blamed Eve & Eve blamed the snake one of the great human pursuits of all time has been to find some way to excuse our sin...to distance ourselves from responsibility for our desperate attempt to be god for ourselves. Not tonight...not in this house...not on my watch...

Mine is on me just like yours is on you. And God is in full agreement God does not whitewash over the gaping holes in our souls. God does not pretend the sickness in our hearts doesn't exist. God does not paper over the chasms in our character. God is clear – the fabric of the cosmos is torn by sin & I am ripped. I am a sinner. I do sin...David said it best: "*from the moment my mother conceived me*" - you too No denial. No excuses. No evasions or equivocations or not as bad as

Dust we are. To Dust we shall return.

There's another strangely ironic piece tonight...We heard this at the beginning:

When I refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, & I groaned all day long.

Day & night your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat.

But surrounding that...before & after...

Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight! Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of guilt, whose lives are lived in complete honesty!...Finally, I confessed all my sins to you & stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, "I will confess my rebellion to the Lord." And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone...Many sorrows come to the wicked, but unfailing love surrounds those who trust the Lord. So rejoice in the Lord & be glad, all you who obey him! Shout for joy, all you whose hearts are pure!

In admitting what we'd rather hide there is forgiveness. In owning what we'd rather blame there's restoration. In acknowledging what we'd prefer to deny there is joy. In honesty there's cleansing. In confession we find unfailing love. And deep within...new life begins. Not some surface washing...not some minor adjustment...but a complete re-creation ...a new creation...a re-birth to life in God's presence as his beloved child...*I will give you a new heart, & I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart & give you a tender, responsive heart.* – Ez 36:26 *For we died & were buried with Christ by baptism. So just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives. Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was. We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. Since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him.* Rom 6:4-8

In admitting what we'd rather hide there is forgiveness. In owning what we'd rather blame there's restoration. In acknowledging what we'd prefer to deny there is joy. In honesty there's cleansing. In confession we find unfailing love. In dying with Christ we are given his life...forever. In dying with Christ we are given his place with the Father. In dying with Christ we are given his triumph over sin death & the evil one.

In dying with Christ we hear the Father's deep call to live in response to his unfailing love...to live as his children here & forever...to live from his strength...to delight in his joy...to share his peace & to speak his promises. So tonight we come. To the cross...the table...to the family of those who shout for joy as their sin is forgiven. Tonight we come to the God who created us for himself & who has given His Son to die for us that we can reconciled to him – embraced again & again in the arms of his mercy & love. Amen