

## Ash Wednesday, February 26, 2020



It is Ash Wednesday. Today we begin Lent. When we receive the imposition of ashes, we are told to remember that we are dust, and that we will return to dust. We are dust and ashes.

But too many of our persecuted brothers and sisters need no reminder that they are dust and ashes. Too many of our Christian family in such places as Nigeria, Sudan, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere *have been turned into ashes* because of their love for Jesus. Too many members of the Body of Christ's bodies have been made into charred corpses by their persecutors and killers.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram, its ISIS-affiliated offshoot, Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP), or Fulani jihadists have burned men, women, and children alive who were sleeping in their cars, or in their houses, or were in church. This is just one example from one country among so many. And it is just one method among far too many by which our brothers and sisters have become martyrs for the sake of the Gospel.

I mention the plight of our Christian brothers and sisters in the northern and middle belt states of Nigeria in particular today because when you receive your ashes *I want you to think about them*. I want you to pray for the Church in Nigeria as your priest marks your forehead with the sign of the Cross. Think with love and sorrow of your brothers and sisters who are being marked in this fashion in Borno State, in Plateau State, and elsewhere.

## SCRIPTURE AND SUGGESTED ACTION:

One of the scriptures readings for Ash Wednesday is Isaiah 58: 1-12. This is particularly appropriate for an Ash Wednesday in which we commit to focusing on our persecuted brothers and sisters. Prayerfully focus on verses 6-12. The fast that the LORD chooses is to perform such actions as to “loose the bonds of wickedness,” “let the oppressed go free,” “break every yoke,” and “share your bread with the hungry.” And in the economy of God, we find that we ourselves are blessed when we choose to bless others. Rather than focusing inwardly, focusing on self – whether self-improvement, self-awareness, self-affirmation, or some other manifestation of navel-gazing, God tells us to focus outside ourselves. And then, He promises, *your* light will “break forth like the dawn,” “*your* healing shall spring up speedily,” “*your* righteousness shall go before you,” and the Glory of the LORD shall be *your* rear guard.”

## **Prayer**

*Here we are, LORD, ready for another Lent. Or are we? Today as we begin, and we feel that unique grittiness as the ashes are impressed on our foreheads, we ask that Your Holy Spirit would make us one with our persecuted brothers and sisters in Your Body. Give us the grace and the courage to bear the burden of knowing the truth of their suffering and of knowing that apart from You we can do nothing. Let us be humbled by the awareness of our mortality even in this regard. We who can live in freedom, drive where we wish, fill our supermarket carts with more food than we need. . . we live with the illusion that we have power, that we have control. But **apart from You we have nothing.** God, please show us how You can use us for the sake of persecuted Christians, and for the sake of Your Kingdom and Your Glory. Amen.*