

ASH WEDNESDAY 2010
Bruton Parish Church
The Reverend John Maxell Kerr

Now. This present moment is the only time we have in which we meet the living God, and may yet repent, and may rejoice.

Oh, it is certainly part of the human condition to look backwards into the past with nostalgia or regret but actually, "living in the past" is a mere metaphor. We are alive now and in this moment and we cannot go backwards in time.

Now.

And we may look forward with hope or apprehension to the future. But the future does not yet exist and we certainly can't live there. We live now. That is just as well. A former penitent had suffered extreme depression and was in and out of psychiatric hospital for years. I asked her what was worst about these attacks. She said, "The terrible fear that the next moment hadn't happened yet." From the pastoral care of that woman I learned the truth of Shakespeare's words, "Present fears are less than horrid imaginings."

De Caussade, one of the greatest Christian spiritual writers called now, "the sacrament of the present moment" because now is the only time we have in which to meet God, or be met by God. Now is God's gift to all who live.

There is a Latin phrase for a devastating insight about now: we do live, and must live, *sub specie aeternitatis*.

The human condition is such, I speak for myself and not just you, that we prefer not to live with this truth before us. We live our lives as if they were only bounded by the past and the future. We live out of Christian realism.

Except today in this Church. For us, now is Ash Wednesday, one of the most important days in the church year. The day we realize what "now" means.

Sub specie aeternitatis means we live our time-bound lives under the canopy of eternity, every minute of them. We live now, are aware of God, now in the present moment God has given us, as God has given us every other moments of our lives. They have been and are and shall be all we have. We will only ever live in one present moment at a time until there

is a bright spring morning at the beginning of some Lent when we will no longer be here. Others will sit where we do and be reminded of the human condition: our mortality.

We are mortal. As the Psalmist writes, we are like the flowers of the field, which now are, and the wind blows over them, and tomorrow they are gone and the place thereof shall know them no more. Just as previous generations sat here suspended in the sacrament of the present moment, the moment of the intersection of time and eternity, now, so do we. If we dwell incessantly on this we are being morbid. But on Ash Wednesday we can acknowledge the truth about our lives and our mortality. It isn't being morbid, it is Christian realism. Some day, I too shall die, and so shall you. But we are alive now.

But we are Christians and now for us is a sacrament, a way of meeting God through God's gift to us. We are alive before God now. *Sub specie aeternitatis*: alive before God in time, suspended between a finite past and a finite future but under the canopy of God's eternity.

Now. We can remember our place in time, we can freely cast our minds back to the time of our lives, the good times and the bad times. We can with total confidence look from the perspective of now into a cloudy and uncertain future. What will be, will be in God's future.

But the one dimension that is clear and unclouded, now in the time of this mortal life is a constant: up to God. We stand in the centre of immensities, full of memories and anxieties and on this day bravely facing our mortality.

"Remember, O man, that dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return." Ah, but such dust! Dust that stands before God having been given a great gift. Now. Time. This present moment is quite literally, the time of our lives, as was every moment we were given heretofore, as will be every moment we receive from God hereafter. Dust we are, to dust we shall return, but we are a welter of dust and fire, we moth-eaten angels, and we stand every moment of our lives in time and in eternity for we stand here, now. In this time to repent, give thanks, pray.

And so, once again, as in centuries past, as in centuries to come, God's faithful mortal people, on Ash Wednesday, without fear and without regret, remember our mortality. And with confidence we may say, Dust we are, and to dust we shall return, but we are created and redeemed by God. *Sub specie aeternitatis*. We are dust that stands in, and is aware of, eternity.