

Dust is our beginning. It is also, most certainly, our end. "You are dust," said God to Adam, before tossing him out of the garden of Eden, "and to dust you shall return." But now, scientists tell us, dust is also a dramatic part of our daily living. With every breath we take, we suck in tens of thousands of particles. Although we can't see it, each of us walks the earth in a cloud of dust, shedding fragments of skin and bits of lint torn from our clothes through friction. Some of it is benign, but some of it is deadly.

Scientific journalist Hannah Holmes suggests that by age 6, our children have consumed at least a cup and a half of pollen, pesticides, lead, dander, and fibers. A cup and a half of the minuscule parts and pieces of our crumbling world. In her book *The Secret Life of Dust*, Holmes reports that our every human action produces tons of the stuff, from tire dust to the invisible clouds that arise from cooking, vacuuming, gardening and powdering our babies. A whole dust food chain lives off it, fungi to mites to cockroaches. Dust. It's downright disgusting.

And you know what? Jesus gets it! He knows full well that we live in a dusty, musty, and rusty world, and that we must learn how to self-clean. The dust is here; it isn't going away. Our spiritual breathing is affected every day by perilous pollen and temptation particles whether we like it or not. Being alive means we are exposed 24/7 to carnal antigens that can, if left untreated, affect our inner life. Still, we can be spiritually vigorous as long as we (1) don't consume the wrong dust, or (2) do not consume too much of it, or (3) do not consume it for too long a period of time.

That's why Jesus prayed at the Last Supper that God would protect his followers in the midst of this earthly mess. "They are in the world," he said to his heavenly Father, "and I am coming to you" And although as earth-anchored followers of Christ, we do not yet live in a dust-free environment, our Lord reminds us that there is a future that awaits us. After all, we have not made the trip

that Jesus anticipated when he looked up to heaven from this polluted planet and offered a passionate prayer for the followers he would be leaving behind.

We are in the world. Period. We are dust, up to our necks in dust, breathing dust and eating dust, day after day after day. It's who we are. It's what we consume. It's where we live. And that presents a problem. One reaction when we face horrors like the Vietnam war, or 9/11, or the War in Ukraine, is a desire to run away, to get away from it all, to move to Canada, or Australia. Many feel that they need to flee to a place where they won't have to face the madness of modern life or breathe the dangerous dust of a stricken and shaken society.

This flight reaction is reasonable, since there is so much we want to escape from in our dusty world. There's the constant flow of filth that frustrates us as we try to keep ourselves morally clean. There's the tempting trash that tantalizes us and thwarts our attempts to use our time and money wisely. There are the seemingly solid structures of the world that project the illusion that the physical world is all there is: The real is what we can touch, and hold, and own and consume. What you see is what you get.

But Jesus saw another reality. He looked beyond the dust, to a spotless heavenly destiny. Pure paradise! This is not to say that Jesus overlooked the gritty world we live in or that he was focused only on the pristine pie in the sky. He knew that the earth was formidable, solid and **real** - a place of matter, dust, physicality, carnality, corporeality - and he was painfully aware that it could be dangerous to our health. Certainly, the cross of Calvary was a very physical danger to HIS health.

But Jesus also knew that we live in a contingent world that could someday implode or explode. This world, or our life in it, will one day end. The flower withers, he said, moth and rust consume, the thief steals. Every human life is going to come to an end, and sometimes it's going to be from dust-related causes - from

lung diseases such as silicosis, caused by the inhalation of sand particles in the desert, or from the cancer that arises from secondhand smoke.

Jesus knows all about mortality, and so he looks up at the Last Supper and prays that God will give us "eternal life!" He asks for God to deliver us from the grit and grime of our day-to-day existence and usher us into a perfectly pure paradise, one in which we are no longer beset by the dusty temptations, frustrations, and illusions of this world. It's a powerful prayer, full of intriguing possibilities. And yet for some reason we don't generally talk much about heaven anymore. So, why has it dropped out of most Christian conversations?

Author and columnist Philip Yancey reminds us that historically, every age before the modern one assumed an afterlife, disagreeing only on the particulars of how best to prepare. Egyptians filled their burial chambers with treasures and equipment for the dead to use. Christian saints are remembered on the day of their death, the day their life in paradise began. Victor Hugo described himself as "the tadpole of an archangel." But nowadays, laments Yancey, we get much advice on becoming the best possible tadpoles, but little on how to prepare for a metamorphosis. Yes, so much of Christianity has become a brand of spiritual self-help, designed to turn us into healthy, wealthy tadpoles. But that's not our destiny - we're supposed to become full-grown frogs, er, saints.

In other words, the point is that our destiny is not dust. Our final destination is pure paradise. Knowing that Christ has gone to prepare a place for us in His Father's house, we need not anguish over the ultimate significance of our existence. We are given value not by our earthly earnings or accomplishments, but by the love of our God who has created us and wants us to spend eternity with him.

Heaven is not so much a realm, as it is a relationship; not so much a kingdom as it is a kinship. Eternal life, says Jesus to God in today's passage, is a life in which disciples will "know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom

you have sent." It is an existence in which each of us deeply and intimately knows the God who has created us in his own image, and the Christ who has come to save us from our sins. And the key to this relationship is a willingness to believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit - to trust that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The path to paradise is a personal connection, one we call faith. Even when Jesus is using the most descriptive concrete images of the architecture of heaven - "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places" - he still bases his description on the language of a faithful relationship. He makes it clear that the way to enter this wonderful heavenly home is to "believe in God" and "believe also in me."

While we may not know what heaven looks like, perhaps we **now** know in some way what it feels like: an intimate, loving and eternal relationship with the one true God. Jesus reminds us that we "do not belong to the world," just as he himself does not belong to the world. Instead, each of us belongs to God, and our true citizenship is in nothing less than pure paradise. As Jesus prays to God at the Last Supper, he makes it very clear that he is "not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours."

They are yours, says Jesus - my disciples are yours. What a powerful and profound comfort that is. When we are gripped by the temptation to put our faith in a pile of ragged, wrinkled and dirty dollars, we are God's. When we are choking on the frustration of life in a dusty, dead-end job, we are God's. When we are fooled by the illusions of a culture that attaches ultimate significance to youth, power, and beauty, we are reminded that we belong to God.

True happiness is going to be found only in a relationship with God. Complete contentment is going to be ours only in the place called paradise. Instead

of playing the tadpole games of this world, we should be getting ready for a metamorphosis, a transformation.

The change is coming, but until that time, Jesus is going to pray for our protection, pleading, "Holy Father, protect them in your name." He wants us to remain safe, secure and united as a community of faith - to "be one," as he and God the Father are one! After all, we are in this world, but not of this world. We're other-worldly. We're paradise people. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.