

**Ash Wednesday**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – February 14, 2018**  
**Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor**

One of the seven wonders of the ancient world was the Great Library of Alexandria in Egypt. The Pharaohs had gathered scrolls and stone tablets for scholars and mathematicians and historians. These writings, gathered in one central library contained the recorded wisdom of centuries. Texts from Babylon and Peloponesia, from Greece and Rhodes, from the great powers of the world and from those civilizations that had long ago fallen into decay could be found in this Great Library. And then one day, history tells us, when Julius Caesar was burning his ships lest they fall into enemy hands, the sparks caused the library to catch fire. The records of centuries were reduced to ashes in a matter of hours.

One day, more than thirty years ago, when I worked in downtown St. Louis, a building on the city's north side caught fire. Since my office faced the north, lawyers and others from across the 19<sup>th</sup> floor came to my office to watch as the flames rose from this huge warehouse. Nothing much was stored there, we later found out – just a lot of paper and cardboard – but it sure made for a dramatic fire that lasted for hours. Now I'm not an arson investigator. I didn't inspect either site, but I suspect that if you compared the ruins of the Great Library of Alexandria with those of that warehouse in north St. Louis, they'd look pretty much alike: charred and smoldering embers and pounds and pounds of ashes.

That's what this day is about. That's what the Church reminds us of today. It doesn't matter whether you have accumulated the riches and the wisdom of centuries or just a warehouse full of junk. It doesn't matter whether you have the most powerful job in the world or if you have no power at all and are just living from day to day, from hour to hour. It doesn't matter whether all your worldly possessions would fill an airplane hangar or a shopping cart or just a small box – in the end, they are worth no more than ashes – and all ashes look alike. What matters is not how much you accumulate in this life, how famous you are, how many people follow you on Twitter; what matters is how closely you are connected to Christ – what matters is what is in your heart.

In our first reading, the prophet Joel reminds us that we must rend our hearts, not our garments. Even now, we are to return to the Lord with our whole heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Even now, he says. Especially now, St. Paul tells us in the second reading. Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. Paul is pointing us to a very important truth. We meet God in the here and now – not in the past, no matter how much we have accomplished; not in

the future, no matter how much we plan or promise to do. We meet God in the here and now – only if we are not focused on our popularity or our fame or our social status or our many possessions. In the end, all of those will be ashes. We meet God in the here and now only if we have opened our hearts to him; only if we leave sin behind and are willing to follow him. In this season of Lent, may we open our hearts to the Lord – may we rend our hearts and not our garments and return to the Lord. Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation!