

February 2008

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Easter Day 2008 will be the earliest it has been since 1913. Only twice in the period of time between 1900 and 2089 does it come so early. Easter Day cannot be before March 22, and the last time it fell then was 1818.

So if you were taken by surprise by the appearance of Ash Wednesday on the first Wednesday in February you are probably not alone. Just as our New Year's resolutions are wearing thin it is time for giving up something!

Lent is the church's pilgrimage to Easter as we are urged to ready ourselves spiritually to share in the transforming reality of Christ's resurrection. Pilgrimage is essential to the life of the soul as we seek to be closer to God. Pilgrimage requires movement, getting up and going from one place to another. Movement involves ordeal and discipline and the willingness to sacrifice in order to get to where one's soul needs to be.

Lent is an inner journey, a pilgrimage of the soul. It identifies us with Jesus in his wilderness journey, as through the ordeal of temptation and sacrifice he drew closer to the Father and to the meaning of his life as God's servant. Lent begins in the ashes of Ash Wednesday as we hear the unmasking words "remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." They remind us of our mortality so that we will not forget how miraculous are our finite lives and how precious our days. This in turn calls us to the care of our souls so that when the hour of our death does come we will be at peace with God and with ourselves.

One of my Lenten books this year is *The Poet of Tolstoy Park* by Alabama writer Sonny Brewer. It is a novel about Henry Stuart whose Ash Wednesday is discovering that he has tuberculosis. It is early in the 20th century, and there is no medical treatment. Henry is led by a deep impulse to move from his home in Idaho to a piece of raw land in Fairhope, Alabama. There, barefooted and with his own hands, he builds an odd round stone hut amid hurricanes and the ravages of his malady. In the process Henry experiences a profound healing and several rich relationships that prolong his days twentyfold and bring his life to a rich wholeness.

Henry's story is that of pilgrimage, of a man who listened to his soul and went on a journey to find peace with himself. Though not an overtly religious man, Henry finds something of the freedom that the Gospel is about. At the end of the novel he says to his son:

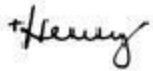
"And what would I teach you, Thomas, if I knew that I would die tonight? Is that what you would like to know? If I could distill my years in these Alabama woods into a sermon, what would my message be?"

"In your own way"-and then Henry turned his face to stare into his son's blue eyes, so much the color of his own-"learn to die in peace. That's what I think is important, Thomas. My own lessons for that have come from how I treat other people, from what things I give value, but mostly from understanding that in every instance fear is of my own making."

These words are close to the timeless wisdom of the saints. I commend them to you this Lent as a form for self-examination. How are you learning to die in peace? How do you treat other people and to what do you give value? How much does self-made fear get in your way? Wrestling with such questions may help your Lenten pilgrimage lead you, as did Henry's, from death to new life.

Easter is early this year, but it is never too late to go on pilgrimage to find more fully the freedom Christ brings.

Your servant in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Henry".

The Rt. Rev. Henry N. Parsley Jr.