

***Dust and Ashes – Ash Wednesday 2020***  
Christ Church – Wednesday 26/02/20, 7.30pm

‘Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return’ – these are the words that go with anointing with ashes. What follows is a meditation on the meaning of dust and ashes in the Bible.

Most obviously it is a sign of repentance, a sign of the seriousness with which a person recognises their guilt and determines to change. Job, after chapter after chapter of arguing his cause, finally realises he has spoken ‘of things I did not understand, too wonderful for me to know... I repent in dust and ashes. Words are exhausted: a covering of ash speaks volumes! Petitions and intercessions can have the same intensity. Daniel puts on sackcloth and ashes and pleads with the Lord to avert disaster (Daniel 9: 3). In the Book of Esther, when the Jewish exiles are to be executed, Mordecai tears his clothes and dons sackcloth and ashes (Esther 4: 1). It’s serious; you mean business with God, and you acknowledge you and your own people have morally contributed to whatever calamity is about to occur. Of course, it can become a ritual like anything else. Joel tells his listeners to get real and ‘rend your hearts and not your garments.’ I’m fairly confident this would come under Jesus’ criticism of doing religion ‘before men’. Do it if you mean it, but don’t put on a show to be seen. So today, rather than rolling our bodies in the dust, we just put a smudge of ash on the forehead, and even this seems a bit showy-offy. Nevertheless, the ash of Ash Wednesday is there as a sign of true penitence: I wonder if we are real about it.

Ash is also a sign of our mortality. Psalm 22: 15 speaks of ‘the dust of death’; Psalm 44: 25 of sinking ‘down to the dust’; and in Psalm 119: 25 ‘My soul clings to the dust’ – life is slipping away. In contrast with God’s eternity, human life is but a span brought to an end in a trifle. Nowadays, I think the image is even more potent with modern cremations: we may have to scatter ashes that are as fine as talcum powder, and face the problem of getting the job done without coming away with half of grannie all over your clothes. This is the dust to which we shall return – in Biblical understanding, the result of the sinful state we all share. In a society that afraid to talk about death, I wonder how we regard this reminder of our mortality?

However, this very mortality is the grounds of the hope we have, the reason we are able to call on God in faith. In Psalm 103, the Psalm regularly used at the committal in the funeral service, we are reminded, ‘the Lord has compassion on those who fear him, for he knows how we are formed; he remembers that we are but dust...’ The Lord remembers how we were made: indeed, he remembers making us.

Let’s linger over Genesis 2 for a minute – the beautiful picture of God forming the human, Adam, out of the *Adamah*, the dust of the earth (the word hints at the red earth of the desert). Remember, in this second version of the creation story there’s so far been no mention of God making any vegetation. The only thing breaking into the universally arid wasteland is a stream rising from the earth.

So, we imagine the Lord God stooping to the ground, kneeling down beside that stream, gathering handfuls of the red dust in his hands, moistening it with running water, squeezing it and shaping it and forming it until the human person is formed, and finally lifting him to his nostrils and breathing life into him - Adam. That's how the Lord remembers us – formed by his hands out of the stuff of the earth, meaning he is intimately bonded with us and we with him. Being people of dust also makes us people of God.

A further thought while we're in this area: Irenaeus, the second century bishop of Lyons, had something rather fine to say: We are God's workmanship. We are invited to offer our hearts to him in a soft and tractable state, and preserve the form in which the creator has fashioned us, having moisture in ourselves. If we lose the moisture and become hardened clay, we also lose the impression of God's fingers. I wonder if we can see ourselves like that: works in progress making visible the workmanship of God.

'Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.' There's nothing wrong with it, and as Christians we see returning to dust as the way to eternal life. There are suggestions of resurrection even in the Old Testament. In 1 Samuel 2, Hannah celebrates her life turned around through unexpected pregnancy, rejoicing in God's power to bring great reversals. 'The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit the throne of honour.'

God prioritises in raising up those ground down with their face in the dirt. Job, who more than anyone was ground down in the pit, expresses his belief that he will be justified and redeemed: 'for I know that my Redeemer lives and at the end he will stand upon the earth ... and in my flesh I will see my God!'

'So it will be with the resurrection of the dead,' writes Paul in 1 Corinthians 15: 'the body that is sown perishable will be raised imperishable.' The old Adam returns to the dust, the *Adamah*, from which he is made; the New Adam raises that human nature heavenward. I wonder if we can hold to that vision.

Finally, in John 8 – a reading often given for Ash Wednesday – Jesus is summoned to adjudicate over the woman caught in adultery, whom the men want stoned to death. Jesus declines to give an immediate response. Instead, he stoops down, and writes in the dust of the ground, before giving the famous verdict, 'Let him that is without sin cast the first stone.' Many have speculated what Jesus words wrote on the ground. We do not know. It's suggested it was a personal message for that woman alone. And that leaves me wondering what Jesus might be writing in the dust of each of our hearts today?