

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, 9th March
‘Dust’ by Mark Pilgrim (Isaiah 40.6-15, John 8.1-11)

We have just listened to one of the most subtly dynamic of gospel scenes: Jesus writes in worthless dust to give an angry mob time to think – time to consider their relationship before God. And, having reflected, they drop their stones and walk away. The scene describes a subtle transfer of power. Jesus writing in the dust causes angry people to reassess a human life. Power passes from the mob through Jesus to raise the woman caught in adultery up from the dust. Her life is saved. She, despite her sin and frailty, is shown to be of worth and value to God.

When he wrote up his reflections on being caught in New York a few blocks down from the Twin Towers on 9/11 in 2001, Rowan Williams called his book, ‘Writing in the Dust’. There was a lot of it about that day. Much of it was the dust of building rubble. But mixed in with it, tragically, were elements of human flesh, bone, blood and hair.

That's the trouble with dust. It's made up of many things – you've got little or no idea what the ingredients are. It's an uncomfortable, messy mix. Dust is the ultimate form of dirt. Someone once said that dirt is just material that is in the wrong place. There's a place for everything but when things are out of place they are dirt. It's the same with plants – in your garden or my allotment: grass, flowers and dust are all referred to in our reading from Isaiah Chapter 40 this evening. Grass, plants and even flowers in the wrong place are...weeds. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with them – but, in the wrong place, they lose their value and become weeds.

Like weeds, there's never a good place for dust to be. The only right place for dust is in the dustbin, emptied later into the dustcart. Dust is worthless and to be got rid of.

Chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis encapsulate the paradox of dust as far as human beings are concerned. In Genesis chapter 2 we discover it is dust from which we are made. ‘The Lord formed man from the dust of the earth’. So far, so good. The Lord looked at his Creation – and it was good. It's a good start for humanity. Genesis chapter 3 goes on to tell the story of disobedience, blame and punishment – with plenty of reference to dust. The serpent is cursed to go on its belly and eat dust, the man is doomed to toiling the ground - which is itself cursed - for a subsistence diet - a mere crust. Genesis 3.19 cheerily has God say to the man: ‘By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground. For out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’

Dust is humanity's beginning: and dust, ultimately, is humanity's end.

There's a line in George Herbert's poetry which goes like this: ‘Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back/ Guilty of dust and sin’. Dust was a big word for Herbert. He used it to imply the Biblical background about sin that Genesis introduces us to. Elsewhere Herbert characterised people as a ‘crumme of dust’ destined to be ‘crumbled onto dust’ at death.

Herbert's joining of the words ‘dust and sin’ is a bit difficult. *Guilty of sin* we might accept and understand but ‘guilty of dust’? Maybe he's alluding to original sin: perhaps to be ‘guilty of dust’ is to commit sin we cannot help or avoid. There are many explanations and pictures of original sin. Few of them have convinced recent generations. People in our time are much more interested in saying ‘I'm Okay , You're Okay’ or ‘If that's what they want to do and it doesn't seem to hurt anybody, that's up to them!’.

But 'dust and sin' remain combined, no matter how optimistic we are. Original sin is said to stem from as 'The Fall' - and one thing that we know about falling is that when we fall, we end up with dust and dirt all over us. Falling also hurts. And when we hurt we remember our mortality. We are made aware of our limitations and we remember 'we are but dust'.

One of the reasons for keeping Lenten disciplines is to help us recognise our limitations and our mortality. Give up chocolate - and chocolate will be what you will fancy. Give up beer - and you will feel like wandering down to the pub. Fast - and you will think about food all day. It seems crazy. But we are human beings, not angels. Christians, following Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, deal with learning to be a bodily person. Learning to be a person of clay who will one day become dust is a major spiritual project.

But it is not the only one. Being a Christian also involves learning how to be merciful, humble and how to struggle for justice, peace and reconciliation. That in itself is a tall order. No wonder Hindus and Buddhists see it as too big a challenge for one lifetime and give themselves many lives to do it in. But Christians recognise that there is only one life time for this work. And Ash Wednesday is an opportunity to start or restart the project in learning how, made in God's image, we are to be bodily people and 24/7 'bodily' Christians.

Let me re-assure you: this movement towards integrating faith and life doesn't or won't happen overnight. There's no need to rush. Yes: integrating faith and life, becoming ever more 'bodily' Christians is important and urgent - but there is no need to panic. Just about every Lenten discipline I can think of provides opportunities to develop as a more integrated, bodily Christian. Someone I know gave themselves the Lenten challenge of giving up moaning. Now that was a *long* 40 days. At least it was for the person in question. For the people they spent time with, it just flew by! My own discipline this year includes giving up rushing. I am going to try to slow down a bit. I'm going to try to give myself 'enough' rather than no time to prepare something. I am going to try to live as if God in his wisdom has created 'all the time in the world'. Taking things slowly, putting a pause into activity is something I do deliberately and enjoy when saying the psalms and canticles at Morning Prayer. It's a lesson to me that time is God's time - and how we use our time comes from God as a gift. Over the next forty days I shall enjoy getting some humour out of it. 'Are you fasting this Lent?' someone might ask. To which I'll reply 'I'm not only fasting - I'm slowing too!' Slowing down. *Down*. As we slow down so we get closer to the earth, to the dirt, to the dust of our lives. As we slow, so we can become more fully aware of who we are and who God has made us to be.

Ash Wednesday then, for all those who undertake physical Lent disciplines, acts as a gateway to the season of bodily spirituality. That's appropriate - as Lent leads us to Jesus' bodily death on Good Friday and to Jesus' mysterious, bodily resurrection at Easter. There is not getting away from it: we are made of clay. We are dust, and to dust we shall return. That's why, this Lent, we commit ourselves to turn from sin to follow Christ - Christ who is the word made flesh, dwelling effectively and powerfully, first bodily and now as the Spirit, among the children of Adam, the earthlings, the people of dust.

(with thanks to Rev Canon Stephen Cherry - a former fellow student at Westcott House, Cambridge, for the template for this sermon)