

## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Ash Wednesday

readings: [Joel 2.1-2, 12-17](#), [2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10](#), [Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21](#)

22 February 2023

On this solemn occasion, I ask your forgiveness for a little light-hearted story with which to begin. It's about an Ash Wednesday service in which, as the entry procession reached the chancel, the vicar, instead of going to his stall, continued onwards and approached the altar. With tears in his eyes, he fell to his knees with great drama and said in a strained voice, 'Lord, have mercy on me for I am only dust and ashes'. He then arose, returned to his place, and was about to give the introductory sentence, when suddenly the curate shouted 'Wait'. He also approached the altar, and as he did so, there were tears in his eyes too. He prostrated himself before it and said, 'Lord, I also seek mercy, for I, too, am just dust and ashes.' He then stood up and returned to his seat, but as the vicar prepared himself again to give the opening sentence, a little known woman came forward from the back of the church. She was reluctant to approach the altar, and kneeling at a distance said quietly, 'Lord, have mercy on me, who is but dust and ashes', and then discretely returned to her pew. At this point the vicar and curate, outraged by this act, turned to one another and said, 'How presumptuous this woman is to think she's but dust and ashes. We're the ones who are dust and ashes here.'

I don't know how this story takes you, I'm glad it made, at least, some of you laugh. As you may have twigged, it's a variation on a story from Luke's Gospel; not the Gospel we've just heard from Matthew, but nevertheless congruent with it, as in both passages, Jesus warns against a false humility which ends up being simply a promotion of ourselves. And obviously, this will not do, because at its heart, real humility is what emerges from a proper sense of who we are and where we fit in the grand scheme of things.

And our service tonight tries to help us with this, for as we receive the ash on our foreheads we will hear the words – 'remember you are dust and to dust you shall return'. Certainly, they are sobering words and they're meant to be so, aimed at puncturing our illusions of self-importance. However, it is important also to remember that they are not designed to plummet us into some sort of self-loathing or of generating feelings of worthlessness; for that will not do either, and is particularly unhealthy. To hear those words 'remember you are dust and to dust you shall return', is to recall us, both to our origins and to the end of our mortal frames; that is, to the earth;

I don't know how many of you are familiar with humus; I don't mean pots of crushed chickpeas that you can buy at the CO-OP and spread on bread, that's hummus! Those of you who are gardeners will, I'm sure, know to what I refer; it's the dark, organic material that forms in soil when plant matter decays. I mention it because there are connections between that word humus and our word for humility; they are both to do with being earthy. Tragically, our sense of connection with the earth has, in much of contemporary life, become weakened, and with it, I think, our capacity for humility. Most of us in the world now live in towns and cities, and there is a real disconnect with the natural world and with nature's cycles; it's one of the reasons why we have an environmental crisis unfolding before us.

Consequently, it becomes increasingly important for us to find ways of connecting with the earth, to renew our relationship with it; to return, if you like, to our origins, our roots, for not only is it vital to both the ongoing life of the planet and therefore our own future life as a species. It's also important because the earth speaks to us of fundamental patterns; of what is needed to grow, to blossom and to bear fruit; it speaks of the reality of death and decay; and it expresses the possibilities of new life, emerging out of that death. To lose sight of our relationship with the earth is to lose sight of who we are.

Some of you will remember Edmund Hillary, who, along with Sherpa Tensing, led the climbing party who achieved the first confirmed case of reaching the top of Everest. The western press at the time led with the headlines, 'Hillary conquers Everest'; by contrast, the newspapers in Kathmandu phrased it rather differently – 'Man and mountain make friends'; what a different way of seeing things. On the one hand, the earth as something to overcome and conquer; on the other, the expression of a relationship between humanity and creation, in which we remember who we are; humility is about being grounded, it's about getting a proper perspective on our place in the world; that we are in relationship with the earth.

Another picture for you. Next week at the University, the Chaplaincy team is running what we've called a Night Sky Walk. We're doing it in conjunction with an academic colleague in the psychology department who has been looking at the effect on us when we look at the stars at night. We're particularly keen for students to have the experience of looking up into the night sky and of finding themselves transported into a place of awe and wonder, of sensing our own smallness in its midst; but not just that, though that would be good in itself. There is another layer to it. For like with the earth, we are also connected to what we see in the night sky. As astronomers will tell us, most of the elements that make up the human body are formed in the stars. Again, an indication that we are part of something much greater than ourselves; we are integrally related to the whole creation.

These sorts of realities help us to get our bearings. Ultimately, of course, they point us towards the mystery and transcendence of God. They remind us that we're not at the centre of the story, though they also remind us that we are part of it. It isn't that we don't matter in the great picture, we do, but our mattering is to be worked out in the context of everyone else also mattering, and indeed of the earth and of the wider creation mattering too. I think that it is within this context that we can learn about true humility, and begin to see that the secret to life is not about getting out of it what we can for ourselves, regardless of the wider impact; it's about exploring what we can offer and contribute towards enriching the whole.

And after all, to return to our earlier image, it's what humus does;; it enables plants to grow and flourish, so a spirit of true humility seeks ways in which we can enable life to grow and flourish around us.

As we start this time of Lent, it would be no bad thing to seek out ways of connecting more closely with God's creation; it might simply involve being more attentive when we go for a walk in the park or in the wider countryside; it might involve trying to grow things for ourselves, if we don't already do so; it might mean making time to find somewhere dark to look up at the sky at night. There are all sorts of possibilities, and we may just find that they provide the material for a humble spirit and the inspiration for a good lent.

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