

Wednesday 5th March: Ash Wednesday. Benefice Holy Communion, Oswaldkirk

At most funerals, we often say or hear the words, “ashes to ashes, dust to dust...” usually as the coffin is placed in the ground. A very solemn moment which often brings tears of grief to those standing by. However, that is not the end. When I take a funeral, I add after these words some of my own, that we “return the person to the very stardust from which we were all made and to which we will all return.”

Today we come again to Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the penitential period of Lent. The traditional Lenten practices mentioned in today’s Gospel reading—almsgiving, prayer and fasting—offer us three distinct yet deeply interconnected ways of growing in our relationship with God. Rather than separate disciplines, they form *one* spiritual path with three dimensions, each reinforcing the others. Fasting is often associated with abstaining from food or drink, but in a broader sense, it is about renouncing anything that hinders our relationship with God. It is meant to be a deliberate turning away from self-centredness, a ‘no’ to anything that draws us away from God. However, this ‘no’ is always in service of a greater ‘yes’: a ‘yes’ to God, expressed through prayer, and a ‘yes’ to others, expressed through almsgiving, which is ultimately an act of self-giving love.

Ash Wednesday begins that period by reminding us of who we are: “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” It is a call to remembrance and to repentance, to turning again: “turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ”. Again, we are called to turn and re-turn to the knowledge of who we are in relation to God. Ash Wednesday is not about pretending that we are less than we are, or that we are more than we are. It is not, as our Gospel reminds us, about “practising piety in order to be

seen". It is above all about honesty, and coming to the realisation that we ultimately are dust. That is not to say we are nothing, or worthless, because Ash Wednesday should also remind us that God makes beautiful things out of dust. He made the universe from dust and every star. It is God who breathes life into dust, earth, and ashes, with the promise of the hope of the Resurrection. He knows already and has always known what we today admit: that we are fallible, fragile, frail creatures; that we have messed up and we cannot put things right; and today we are called to admit honestly that we are utterly and totally dependent on God. Then, God, allowing us to see ourselves for who we truly are, pours upon us His mercy and love.

We must also be aware during Lent that it can subtly become self-focused rather than God-centred. What begins as acts of devotion can, if we are not careful, turn into a pursuit of personal achievement or public approval. Jesus reminds us that Lent practices are not about drawing attention to ourselves, but about deepening our relationship with God and serving others with humility. True Lenten discipline leads us away from self-interest and towards a heart that is fully open to God's grace.

Lent, then should be the time when we are called back to who we are, in relation to God, to our neighbour, and to ourselves, and as we bring the troubles of the world before God we pray for peace and for justice, we need more than ever to find and hold fast to those things which draw us towards God.

Ash Wednesday is when we stand at a turning point, a moment when we accept the call to remember who we are before the holiness of God. In repentance, in turning again to God who knows us and loves us, in confessing the sins which God already knows and is always ready to forgive, we come before God honestly and without shame to say:

this is who we are; dust, yes, but deeply beloved stardust, the stuff the stars are made of, and God meets us in the dust, in the ashes, and in the ordinary stuff of bread and wine, with deep and transforming grace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.