

Ash Wed — 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2022

Remember man that you are dust!

Joel 2: *come back to me with all your heart*

2Cor 5: *the appeal we make in Christ's name: 'be reconciled to God.'*

Mt 6:1–6, 16–18: give alms, . . . pray, . . . fast.

The ashes of Ash Wednesday are a strong and sombre sign ... In days going right back into the Old Testament the people of God have used ashes as a sign of repentance. “Sitting down in sackcloth and ashes” is a phrase that repeatedly crops up in the OT, for occasions of imploring God’s mercy.

It’s an appropriate sign, then, marked on our foreheads, on the very same place where we were signed with the sign of the Cross at baptism, that we are committing ourselves to Lent, to imploring God’s forgiveness, help and mercy these 6½ weeks ahead.

The ashes themselves are made from burning the dried palm branches that last year we celebrated Palm Sunday with ... strewing them and waving them as Jesus entered Jerusalem in a blaze of adulation. These palms are burnt and the ash that remains is the ash we bless now for our receiving today. In a way, ash is the ‘nothing’ that remains once something is burnt up and destroyed. Ash,

therefore, is a good and powerful sign that we are ‘nothing’ without God. That is the truth, ... without God we would not exist, we would be ‘less than nothing and emptiness.’ One of the options for the priest as he gives the ashes is to say, “Remember, man that you are dust, and unto dust you will return.” We are no more than that if we do not have God. He made us from the same elements of the universe as everything else, and all is ultimately dust ... “from the dust of the earth, He fashioned us” as Genesis says ... but He did not stop there, He breathed into man His own breath, His spirit, our soul ... and so we are more than dust ... but we are only more than dust by God’s choice and gift. Without Him, without His choice and gift we are just dust, ash, nothing ...

So as we wear our ashes today, it’s sign both of *humility*, and also of *pride*: humility, in that we are aware of our precarious position as fragile creatures before God; pride, in that we are signed and sealed with the sign of the Cross. As we walk out of this chapel, we may well be spotted sporting this sign of the Cross in ash on our

foreheads. It is our statement, our label, the best sign that we can give, that we are committing ourselves anew this Lent to the Lord. The Gospel gives us our annual programme: *pray, fast, give alms* (and the Lent leaflet next Sunday will spell out some ways we might each think of doing that). But it is not just about self-help, self-discipline ... it's about giving ourselves over to the Lord. We *fast* (giving up something) so that we can *pray* (giving more to the Lord) and *give alms* (giving more to others). The spirit of Lent is just that: to be focussed less on ourselves and more on God and others.

I read this in the prophet Isaiah (58:6–8) this morning, and it is perfect for the start of Lent, calling us to the fast of 40 days that we are beginning today:

*Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me — it is the Lord God who speaks — to break unjust fetters and undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke, to share your bread with the hungry, and shelter the homeless poor, to clothe the man you see to be naked and not turn from your own kin? Then will your light shine like the dawn and your wound be quickly healed over.*

Let us, as we receive the ashes today truly set our hearts on pleasing God through prayer; helping others through our almsgiving, and fasting to remind ourselves that we are totally reliant on God. He keeps us in being and He makes us truly precious, for otherwise we are just dust — atoms and molecules blowing about in the universe — meaningless and nothing. Let us be reminded that without Him we are nothing, and turn to Him now and tell Him we love Him and want to serve Him ever more deeply. This is the sign on our foreheads today ... for otherwise “you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.”