

## Ash Wednesday February 13<sup>th</sup> 2013

### Ground yourselves

Isaiah 58.1-12

Matthew 6.1-6. 16-21

In nomine...

So last night we talked fasting, and tonight we're talking penitence. I've given myself the cheerful title "Ground yourselves". Rich in meaning...

"Ground yourselves": First of all, you can grow roots. Not geographical ones, not to be people who never leave Oxford... But just as the parable of the sower, and we talked about last night, you can be the soil for the word of God to be rooted in you. You can use Lent to do what you can to offer a fertile grounding for all that comes to you from God. You can nourish the word of God within you.

Or, a related image is that of an anchor. Something that holds you steady. While you're busy letting go rather than giving up, you can let yourselves be held by God. There are storms, even in Oxford. There will be hurricanes, blizzards, downpours ahead in your lives. But let your faith anchor you. Go deeper and let God hold you.

Going deeper, digging deeper... "Ground yourselves": Second, you are ground. Soil. We talked last night about the etymology of the words Humanity, Humility. These words come from the Latin for 'ground, soil, earth.' In fact, Adam in Hebrew, is closely related to that for 'earth', adamah. We are clay, dust, ash. We are dust, to dust we shall return. I could talk about dust and dusting in your flats... let's face it, dust is often little bits of you. Ugh. But think about all those carbon, hydrogen, oxygen particles within us, all those atoms and molecules, everything that makes us up. We don't come from nowhere, we are part of the universe. In the miracle of birth we come from the wider creation; in the miracle of death we physically go back to the wider creation.

"Ground yourselves": Third, ash is symbol of your groundedness, your earthiness, your humanity. It's pretty powerless. It has been ground down – that way it goes a long way (like the breaking and distribution of break at Communion). There's nothing hidden about it. Especially not when it's on your forehead. It is a sign of our humility, our recognition that we are but dust. And that's the opposite of the boasting we heard about in the Gospel reading. There is nothing in ourselves we can boast about – only God.

And when we stop our boasting, when we realise we are fully dependent on God, our root, our anchor, we can deepen our humility. Our understanding of our humanity. Our concept of our place within wider humanity, within the whole creation. Ash is a symbol of penitence in the Bible – Job rolls around in the ashes. Penitence goes hand in hand with humility, an awareness of our need. Penitence is about recognising that 'no man is an island': that we aren't self-sufficient, however independent we may try to be. Don't let the fact of your growing up, your reaching adulthood, make you think that because you can look after yourself physically, you can look after yourself in every way.

We can't save ourselves by ourselves. We need help. We need other people to teach us, we need God to deepen us. We can't find our security in ourselves, or indeed in other people – only in God. You need God. We all need God. There is always someone greater than ourselves to turn to. Just as your tutors know more about your subjects than you do, just as your parents may well

yet be better at running homes than you are, and you can look to them for advice, so when you need the deepest kind of advice possible, you can look to God, who in Jesus knows more about being truly human than any of us. Learning requires humility. What a good place this can be to exercise humility.

Last night I suggested that one way of learning humility is to practise it. By serving others, by being willing to do the little chores our flatmates have again overlooked, and not requiring anything in return. By recognising that my time, my life, is no more important than yours. By recognising that I am no more important than other people. When you recognise your brotherhood or sisterhood with the hungry, your human connection with the oppressed, your actual closeness with other human beings you might not normally relate to – the wayfarer, the homeless, the naked, and so on – then you are not exalting yourselves above other people, you are recognising your equal importance on our earth and in the eyes of God.

Every prayer, every cry to God, can become an act of penitence, an expression of our humility. We are powerless, you, our God, are powerful. You could begin your day with the simplest of prayers: “I am me (name), You are God. You are God, I am me.” Thankfulness, praise, humility, go hand in hand. Or simply relax into the short phrase “God is in his heaven.” Let’s be human, not strive to be gods, this Lent. Let’s be people of ash, people of the earth, this Lent. And let’s thereby seek to be truly human in whatever ways we can. So that we can more readily encounter and receive the One who is fully divine.