

Thought for the Day Lent 2023/1

ASH WEDNESDAY

Matthew 3.1-6 Dust and ashes



In those days John the Baptist came into the wilderness of Judea proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Matthew 3.1-2

The Gospel begins with repentance — a change of mind, a change of heart, a new start. This is where the good news about Jesus begins in all four gospels, with the mission of John the Baptist. A strange, prophetic figure coming out of the wilderness, dressed like Elijah the prophet, with his unkempt hair and rough camel-hair tunic. But he made a profound impression. They came flocking down to the river Jordan to hear his message: God’s kingdom is coming! Better get ready!

That's a good place to begin our Lenten journey through Matthew's Gospel. Ash Wednesday is traditionally the day when we get a cross marked on our foreheads out of the ashes of last year's palm crosses, with the words: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return. Turn away from sin, and be faithful to Christ."

Dust reminds us simultaneously of our creation and our mortality. It echoes the story in Genesis 2, where God made Adam (= humanity) "from the dust of the earth". "Adam" sounds a bit like Adamah, the Hebrew word for "dust" — so it's a kind of pun on his name. As humans, we are made of the same material as the rest of our wonderful planet, formed and shaped out of the same atoms and molecules as everything else on earth. It's kind of reassuring to know that our bodies are part of the same biosphere as everything else, constantly being recycled and reused.

Dust in the Bible is also a symbol of repentance — covering yourself with dust and ashes is a visible way of showing you're really sorry. (It probably felt pretty horrible, too.) Repentance involves not just "acting sorry" but real remorse — facing up to what we've done (or failed to do) and taking responsibility for it. That's why "truth in the inward parts" is so important (Psalm 51.7).

But repentance doesn't stop there! The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, which means "letting our minds be remade" — opening up the dustbowl of our minds to the renewing and refreshing power of God's grace. Without that, we can just get caught in a downward spiral of guilt and despair — which isn't what God wants for his children. Repentance isn't the end — it's just the beginning. If you read on

through Psalm 51 (a good one to read in Lent), you can feel how the mood shifts from repentance to rejoicing: “Give me again the joy of your salvation, and sustain me with your bountiful spirit.”

At the beginning of the Gospel, John invites his listeners to come and wash in the River Jordan, letting God wash away their sins and lead them into a new life. At the beginning of Lent, Ash Wednesday invites us to ‘turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ’, to experience God’s forgiveness and make a new start. It’s not about making ourselves miserable, but about getting ready, “preparing the way of the Lord,” clearing the decks for God’s kingdom. It’s a good time to ask God to wash us clean and help us to make a new start, as we prepare to follow Jesus on his journey to the cross over the next 40 days.

Dust

As we journey through the forty days of Lent, TFTD will be exploring Matthew’s Gospel in bite-size chunks, with a reading and prayer for every day. And there are other ways to resource your Lenten journey: see below. My prayer is that God may use these resources to bring us all closer to the kingdom of heaven this Lent.

God bless,

Loveday



Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing that you have made, and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent: create and make in us new and contrite hearts that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may receive from you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness: through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. AMEN

[Common Worship Collect for Ash Wednesday, © The Archbishops' Council 2006]