

St Peter's, Ealing  
Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> February 2020  
Ash Wednesday

Remember that you are dust.

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This opening phrase from the imposition of ashes is pretty stark. In the mind of a vicar who has had the honour of burying the mortal remains of a number of parishioners in the Garden of Remembrance this phrase is difficult to bear. I have anointed heads with ash on this very day that are now ash in the church grounds.

Our mortality is brought to the fore; used some might feel as a bit of a red rag to say 'don't get above yourself, remember your mortality.'

I would like to think though there is something more to this.

In Matthew's gospel tonight we heard Jesus teaching us how to pray contrasting the hypocrites with those of faith. The hypocrites stand on street corners, parade their sanctity before everyone, showing off their holiness. Jesus says they have had their reward.

Was that what they did? Publicly showing their adherence to the rites and rituals of the day. Did they want to be those special people; those chosen ones who were clearly on their way to the Kingdom of God?

Or were they just doing what they thought was required of them by tradition and the law?

Jesus was acknowledging human weakness and ability to so easily fall into traps. Traps that would bring us down, that would lead us along the path of destruction. Traps of human frailty. To prevent his listener falling into traps Jesus gives sound advice for prayer. Pray privately, fast without show; give secretly to the work of God.

Yet again these can be misinterpreted, even misused directions. Jesus isn't calling us to a secretive faith, one which is enclosed and disengaged with the

world. I was once told by a faithful church member, “I couldn’t possibly talk to anyone about faith. It is personal to me.” Yet we are encouraged to proclaim the good news of Jesus.

The exhortation of Ash Wednesday is to remind us of our humanity in all its frailty and brokenness; remembering our roots is to re-establish our understanding of ourselves; to re-dress our place in the universe and re-establish our relationship with God.

The hypocrite had forgotten why they were praying, giving to the poor and fasting. Their centre of focus had moved from worship of God and adherence to the law to worship of self and promotion of one’s own religiosity. In Jesus’ example it had all become about themselves. They had forgotten prayer, fasting and generosity in charitable giving were all about their relationship with God. Jesus’ examples aimed to re-dress that relationship, helping his followers focus on God rather than have others focus on them.

Lent offers us a time for that re-assessment of our relationship with God as well as renewing our relationship with ourselves. In both instances to acknowledge that we are broken and incomplete whilst knowing we are loved and in being eternally loved we are healed and made whole.

Remembering we are dust and to dust we shall return is to know we are made and loved by God and so we can, in God’s power and love, turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.