

FROM DUST TO GLORY

Isaiah 58. 1-12

2 Corinthians 5. 20b-6. 10

Matthew 6. 1-6, 16-21

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Our Lenten journey begins with a simple yet dramatic symbolic action: ashes, placed on our foreheads in the sign of the cross. ‘Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return’. These words echo the words of God to Adam and Eve in the story of the fall: ‘By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return’ (Gen 3. 19).

And what is this ash? It is the product of a chemical reaction that results in carbon; the stuff of which we are made.

It is easy to think that this ash, this carbon, is worthless; and that, by extension, the marking of our foreheads tells us that we, too, are worthless. This is not so. Carbon is the element found in all known life forms and is the second largest element found in the human body. Carbon exists in our planet in different forms; and what we see here as mere ash today, has the potential to become a diamond. Dust can become glory.

Lent begins not simply with a reminder of our mortality, but also the encouragement to discover how our lives can be transformed.

In the Old Testament, ashes were used as a sign of penitence. They were sprinkled on the head and, in a precursor to the sad character of Cinderella, people would sit in them and look miserable. Ashes reminded the Hebrew people of the absence of

God's glory. One such story about the absence of God's glory we read in 1 Samuel. In an epic battle, the tribes bring the Ark of the Covenant to the front line in the hope that God's presence will give them victory. They were very wrong. They were roundly defeated and the Ark of the Covenant was stolen by the Philistines. The old priest Eli and his two sons died (see 1 Sam 4). Eli's pregnant daughter-in-law, on hearing the news of the loss of the Ark and the death of her family, immediately gave birth to a son who found he had no father, no grandfather and no uncle. She named him Ichabod, which means 'The glory has departed'.

But in the Christian faith, ashes are marked on our forehead in the sign of the cross. To those who do not believe, the cross is a symbol of death; but to those who do believe, it is a symbol of the transformation of dust into glory. This signing of the cross with ash will remind us that our lives are, in fact, full of *worth* because our mortality is not the end of the story. Our Lord, God's Son, came among us and died on a cross to reconcile the whole world to himself. Although sinless, he took the enormity of all the world's sin – past, present, and future – and embraced it. Because of that loving embrace, his body, though dead, did not decompose and turn back to dust. Instead, he went to Sheol (which is translated as 'dead' or 'hell' in the Apostles' Creed) so that even those long dead might hear his redeeming voice. The orthodox icon of the Harrowing of Hell is a powerful image of Jesus, dragging Adam and Eve out of the grave. And on the third day, he rose again from the dead. His body was changed from that which could have been dust, into glory – God's glory – the glory that the disciples had glimpsed bits of themselves, as we saw last Sunday in the account of the Transfiguration.

These ashes are not just a reminder of our need for contrition and repentance, or even our mortality. They are, ironically, also a reminder of the *glory* that is to come.

Have you ever thought about it? There is nothing passive about the redemption of the world by Christ. When we consider our Lord's passion, his agony on the cross, his bloody death, his burial and his resurrection, we see not a passive God, but a God who is at work in our world. Today, on this Ash Wednesday, we are invited to cooperate in that work.

Go back to the scripture readings that are given for today; there is no passivity there. The prophet Isaiah tells us to shout and lift up our voices like a trumpet! We are not to sit in self-pity in ashes, but rather to get up and do something beautiful for God: to let the oppressed go free; to share bread with the hungry; to do something radical for the homeless; to heal estrangement in family relationships (see Isa 58. 6-7).

And St Paul, when he writes to the Corinthians, urges reconciliation; the same reconciliation that Jesus obtained for us on the cross. Paul gives encouragement to us now, even when we are desperate or in despair: 'As dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything' (2 Cor 6. 9-10).

People wallowing in self-pity did not impress Christ, for he knew that there is a very thin line between humility and spiritual pride. His words in the gospel are strong and he challenges us today to discover where our true treasure is.

My friends, we begin a journey today that will help us change our lives and to turn them around, for that is the meaning of the word repentance. We begin by saying sorry to God; we receive the ash as a sign of that repentance and a reminder of our mortality. But, encouraged by the scriptures and the tradition of the Church, we use our Lenten journey to change from dust to glory. Just as the carbon in the ash shares the same chemical composition as the diamond, so our fragile lives are bound up in the *glory* of Jesus Christ. Amen.