

St James' Church, Weybridge

Ash Wednesday – 14th February 2024

First Reading 2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10

Through Christ we can be reconciled with God here and now.

Gospel John 8:1-11

We who are sinful have no right to condemn one another.

HOMILY

Every so often, Hollywood produced one of those 'disaster scenario' blockbuster movies where very few people survive. From classic films of woe like 'Towering Inferno' to the highly acclaimed 'Planet of the Apes' to the more up to date offerings such as 'Earthquake,' 'Airplane,' 'The day after tomorrow' or '2012'... there are so many of them. In some of these films the world faces Armageddon and humanity fights to survive; and sometimes groups of people do. Often the end to much of human society as we know it today leads to some form of new life or re-birth for planet earth. In the fantasy make-believe land of film, we seem comfortable with death – it surrounds us there. But in real life we shy away from discussing it.

Often when I visit families in the wake of bereavement to help them plan the funeral for their loved one, we start with a blank sheet of paper. Family members, children, even partners of the deceased often ask me if I can help them choose things that are appropriate when in some cases I have never met the individual myself.

They ask because they didn't have such a conversation about these things; "We didn't talk about death" is a phrase that is often used. At St James' we are encouraged to have these difficult conversations with our families.

Today we are reminded by John's Gospel to think about death. In a moment we will stand before the Chancel step as the people we are – before God who knows the very depths of our hearts – ready to receive upon our forehead the mark of the cross in ash, which has been prepared by the burning of palm crosses returned to church. The mark of the cross is etched upon our forehead as the priest says, "*Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Repent and believe the Gospel.*"

The symbolism of the ashes reminds us that Human beings are created from the dust of the ground, and have the life of God breathed into us. We can read all about this in the Old Testament book of Genesis.

For it is when Adam and Eve become aware of who they are, in all their frailty, weakness and sinfulness – expressed as nakedness before God, the truth about the human soul and our vulnerability is made manifest. They know that as they came from the dust, so they will in the end return to the dust – as will we.

Not only do the ashes in the form of a cross remind us of our mortality and that we too will, in God's time return to the ground, but also that Jesus died for us upon the Cross. The ultimate moment of at-one-ment.

Just as in the garden of innocence, so today through Jesus we are at one with God, should we choose. God knows us, loves us and longs to be in relationship with all. So

today we are invited, to think about our death, to look it in the face, and not to pretend we are immortal. It is a painful process, I know it is hard to do.

But we are not left alone to despair. Remember how the words at the imposition of ashes conclude: *“Repent and believe the Gospel.”*

The woman down in the dust and sand of the outer Temple precinct, who is accused by men of adultery, could be any of us. But Jesus doesn't condemn her. He sends her away restored, saved, alive, but also reminds her not to sin again. She is in a moment saved from a terrible death at the hands of sinful men, by the Lord who comes to bridge the gap between God and vulnerable humanity.

Today is the day the Church gives us for remembering our mortality, while offering us the hope of more – forgiveness by Jesus who says that he doesn't condemn, and offers each of us life eternal, as promised in the Gospel, as revealed through Jesus our Lord and his death upon the Cross of Calvary.

As we enter the season of Lent, we are reminded that Jesus was a human being like us. Yet I suppose a more fully human person than the rest of us, in his ability consistently to put the claims of God above his human desires; but human like us in being tempted to put self first. Jesus experienced our weakness, and our mortality, suffering and temptation. He knew for himself what it was like to be aware of death, and to be afraid – remember his prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest.

Jesus lived as we do, he loved as we do, and he experienced death too. But by doing so he gave us hope that our mortality is not 'the final curtain' as Frank Sinatra often sings at the end of funeral services. Death did not, ultimately, have power over Jesus, nor does it over those who belong to him. So, as we are reminded this Ash Wednesday that we are dust, we are also reminded to be faithful to Christ, to recall the Gospel hope and to follow the one who shows us a way to face death and not despair.

Awareness of our mortality is both humanity's greatest tragedy and our greatest gift! Of course, reflecting upon the end can lead us to despair, but it can also drive us on to greater heights of achievement. We can allow it to make our lives meaningless, or we can use it to remind us to make the most of the time we have and love others as Christ loves us.

We don't need a disaster movie to know the truth about life and death. The season of Lent encourages us to be honest with ourselves and with God about who we are – weak, sinful, mortal, and in need of salvation. Only then can we choose to turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ and live our lives, brief though they may be, to the full in God's service as his disciples today. Life is for living and Jesus offers us life eternal. Amen.

Father Damian Harrison-Miles, February 2024.