

## Sermon 2 – February 18

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

Gen 9:8-17

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

### From Dust we Came

On Wednesday evening, Jim knelt at the altar rail in the dim chapel, and bowed his head. He had just prayed... with the rest of the congregation:

We have not loved you with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength.

We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.

We have been unfaithful, proud, and hypocritical

We have been envious of those more fortunate than ourselves.

We have been blind to human need and suffering, and indifferent to injustice and cruelty.

We have wasted and polluted your creation, and lacked concern for those who come after us.

Lord have mercy – Christ have mercy.

Now he waited patiently for the priest to come along the rail, with the small black vial. Before each person, the same solemn words were intoned:

“Dust you are and to dust you shall return.

Repent and believe the gospel.”

The priest’s thumb dipped again into the black blend of oil and last year’s ashes, and marked on his forehead the sign of the cross.

As Jim knelt there, waiting to rise to his feet, an image came to mind of a funeral he had recently attended, and those similar words – Dust to dust; ashes to ashes – standing by the grave on that grey day as mourners threw handfuls of sand into the gaping hole and on to the coffin below.

Last Wednesday people like Jim gathered here in the chapel at 10 am, and they gathered here in the church at 7 pm, but in bigger numbers. Thank you to those of you who went out of your way to come. I hope that it was meaningful for you.

Certainly people who spoke to me afterwards said so, and they spoke to others also, saying how much they appreciated it. It was not just the liturgy, serious as it is, but it was the sense of warmth in gathering and sharing as Christians across denominations: Anglican from St Peter’s and All Saints, Catholic – Bp Charles and Mons Brian and many others. There’s a feeling that we are beginning to know one another and to feel comfortable in one another’s spaces. We are uniting as a worship community, able to enjoy one another’s company.

After the service, we chatted over a suitably austere supper: water, crackers, hummus. In his sermon, Fr Brian referred to Lenten disciplines – he said that Bishop Charles would be wearing a hair shirt for Lent – but that none of us should speak to him about it – least he lose the benefit of this ascetism.

Our Bishop Ellie one year decided to give up chocolate for Lent – as too did her stepmother and step brother. To reinforce this resolution it was also agreed that each person who broke their resolve would owe the others £5. Ellie's father alone did not embark on this discipline. But the end of the first week of Lent, he sat them down to talk. Each one of the 3 had confessed to him that they had broken their Lent resolution! They hadn't been brave enough to tell each other! Now they had to pass over their money.

This experience has not put Ellie off. Far from it. In the clip I watched – available on the diocesan website – she talks now about fasting. Fasting for forty days. She discusses the spiritual benefit of such a practice.

You may have decided to go into the wilderness for Lent: to give an indulgence up for Lent perhaps. Good on you! You may have found a book to read, or plan to pray more regularly. I wish you well. Some will join Graham in the chapel on a Thursday evening to discuss the readings of Lent; and some will meet with Ross' group on a Wednesday. It will be edifying.

Some of you are strong, I know. Some keep promises that last the entire period of Lent. Many of us – and I am among them – find Lent resolutions hard to keep. This year I plan to enrol in an online course led by Richard Rohr, a Franciscan. It is based on a book called *Immortal Diamond*. The good thing about it for me is that it will last beyond Lent, and so I will have time to catch up on those sessions that I am bound to miss.

The benefit of trying to keep a Lent resolution is that we gain a new insight into how weak we are, and how easily tempted. We understand our frailty in a new way, and how much we need to depend on God.

Lent reminds us that we are mortal, and that we choose how to live. It provides us an opportunity to tweak the direction we are headed in – and to consider where we centre our lives – whether it is on our own needs, or on God.

As Jim knelt in the chapel, he remembered too as the sun came out briefly in the whipping wind, that dust comes from the earth, that in the opening verses of the Bible God had created that earth and said that it was good. And it was out of that self-same earth that Adam was formed.

The earth is our home. We are part of it – we belong to it. We come out of it and will return to it. So we are offering another option for Lent, which you will find in your Fisherfolk. Each week you will receive a different insert, focussing on a concern for the environment and care for the earth. You will see that this week is to do with our use of transport. There are a number of actions you might take, and some options to ponder.

Coincidentally, the Church of England is also advocating for the care of creation in Lent. Following on from David Attenborough's *Blue Planet* series with its horrific images of animals and fish tangled in plastic waste, or eating it as food, they are calling for an end to single-use plastics. They suggest avoiding throwaway plastic cups, buying bamboo toothbrushes and eating bread not packaged in

plastic. Similarly here there's been a campaign to stop using plastic straws.

In our use of plastics and in many other ways, we humans are damaging the world we live in – God's world. The world is God's second book of revelation. God speaks to us through the world we are a part of. We heard that in Genesis – the rainbow in the sky is set as a covenant. It is through the stuff of creation that we receive sacraments – bread, wine, water. Communion, baptism - key rituals of our lives.

Jim remembered that too. As the ash dried on his forehead he was reminded of a much earlier time that he was marked with the sign of the cross on his forehead. He scarcely remembered it: his parents had brought him to church and he was named and signed as belonging to Christ - baptised in the name of the father and of the son and of the holy spirit.

Baptism is part of the Lent journey though perhaps it is not one we usually focus on. Yet today's gospel begins with the baptism of Jesus. Before the wilderness, Jesus was baptised and affirmed as son of God.

For us, Lent takes a different flavour, if it begins with the knowledge that we – each one of us – are beloved children of God. The starting point for Lent then is not that we have gone astray – even though we know that we all have one way or another. It does not begin in shame and sin. The starting point for Lent is that we are made in the image of God and that we are deeply and truly loved. It begins in being grounded and strong in whose we are.

We too are sons and daughters of God. We too have a piece of the divine life to bring to the world. But the light of Christ we carry grows dim and weary. Accretions build up over our souls. We need an opportunity to scrape back the superficial muck that's gathered to clear away the grit and dust. And as we do so, we will reveal what lies beneath; we will re-discover our true identity – like diamonds hidden in the rough.

As Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote:

*I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and  
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal  
diamond  
Is immortal diamond.*

As we begin this Lenten season, know that God forgives us and calls us to become new people. God longs to cleanse us and renew us that we might live our lives in response to God's never-ending love.

From dust we came – yes; and to dust we shall return – certainly. But it is the star dust of distant galaxies and the dust that forms diamonds.

Amen.