

In a few moments, I will make the sign of the cross on our foreheads with the words 'remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ'

Reflecting on these words which I've said year after year got me thinking.

Firstly, what sort of dust are we?

Some of us might think of ourselves as gold dust - We might be rich

Some of us might think of ourselves as star dust (truer than you might think)– we might be famous

Some of us might think of ourselves as glitter dust – we might be talented

But in the end, we are all dust – a carbon-based life form made up of elements which link us to the dust of the earth to which we all will ultimately return. This identification with the earth is reason why in our Lent course we will be thinking about our place in caring for God's world, looking at the bible and what it says, thinking through practical ways to engage with environmental concerns.

And Yet each of us is loved and is precious to God; we bear God's image and are inhabited by God's spirit. What a strange dilemma.

So, we are dust, and we know that the image of God in us constantly gets spoiled by the wrong things we do and say – so the call on Ash Wednesday is to turn away from all that spoils and turn back (that's what the word repent means) to Christ in faithfulness of heart and life.

There is something of the dilemma at work in our Gospel reading. A reading that make us feel uncomfortable, if we're honest. It's a barbaric image, of a woman (and the question, so where was the man) dragged by religious people, made to stand in front of Jesus with the intention of stoning her to death and expecting Jesus to join in. But look at what Jesus does, look at what Jesus says...and indeed what he doesn't say!

Strangely enough, even though these pharisaic religious leaders didn't realise it, they brought this woman to exactly the right place, a sinner brought face to face with the only one who can deal properly with sin – Jesus Christ. It's the focus of this evening, being confronted by our wrongs, but in the right place, in an encounter with the living Lord Jesus, present also in bread and wine. The passage also causes us to ask whose voice are we listening to – the critics, or Jesus? The critics condemn, mock, destroy or humiliate. And if we're honest sometimes we are our own worse critics – every means possible is used to exploit our weakness and confirm our failures. The way this encounter is worded it is clear the pharisees did not 'catch' this woman in the act of adultery – they'd set her up to fail, to destroy her life, and tried to trap Jesus in his words.

The Gospel writer John also exposes the pharisee's motives. They aren't really concerned about her adultery and protecting the purity of society around them. No, they wanted to trap Jesus where he would have to choose between his message of loving, costly forgiveness and the old norms handed down from the time of Moses. This woman, abused already, was further abused by them using her for their own selfish, personal agenda. They knew that Jesus was a threat to their little empire built up for their personal gain. Jesus is faced with these competing voices, as we all are. The voice of the world, or the crowd, or even individuals who are not really acting in our best interest but in their own, but whose plausibility is masked by their respectability. Like the pharisees we all fall into that temptation of pointing out the failures of others while neglecting our own.

It's clear from this passage, even though we tend to think so, that sexual sin be rated higher than other sins; the most offensive sin described in this story is not the adultery; it is the malice, arrogance, and ignorance of the Pharisees to use the sin, of another person for personal gain while ignoring the sin that

resides in their own heart. The words of Jesus in this passage show that sin cannot be ignored, but cause us to ask the question, on this Ash Wednesday and every other day – how should we respond to sin?

You see, this passage has been used by those who say that sin doesn't matter, or to justify their own sin – who are you, they say, to call my actions into question – don't throw stones at me unless you are sinless yourself! It's clear from the words of Jesus 'go and leave your life of sin' that this woman was guilty, but no more or no less guilty than the pharisees too. All are dust, and all will return to dust – equally. The bible is full of people who know they are guilty, and the Old Testament hero David was guilty of the same sin as this woman, yet when he comes to God in repentance – which means willing to change – he is forgiven and is given a new start. Jesus here tells the woman to stop sinning. He does not excuse her sin by appealing to her background or her victimisation, nor does he call her actions a personal choice which is a lifestyle different to the one he would prefer.

Instead, he speaks to her directly and personally – as we read God's word and spend time in prayer he does the same for us. He will challenge us as only can, not condemning but lovingly correcting us compassionately – he longs to forgive our sins, that's why he died for us, not to be weighed down by guilt, but free to leave our lives of sin and to serve him, like this woman no longer living to the standards of critics who make arbitrary rules about our worth, but a free child of God walking in the light of Jesus Christ.

The gospel writer John in his first letter writes 'if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness'.

Or in the words of our service - remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.

Whatever type of dust I am, or you are; Jesus loves you, he doesn't condemn you but in his love says 'go – and sin no more'.

Amen