

## Ash Wednesday 2021

Lord Jesus Christ. Most merciful redeemer, friend and brother. May we know you more clearly; love you more dearly; and follow you more nearly. Day by day. Amen.

**It was the worst of times, it was the season of darkness, it was the winter of despair...**

Words, of course, of Charles Dickens.

This Ash Wednesday is indeed set within a winter of despair, within the wilderness of these times.

Today we begin the season of Lent: the season of struggle, and decision. But in these parts it feels as if we have been in this place for eleven months already, stuck in a virus infected Groundhog Day.

Many of us are in a worn-out place, marked by, as one writer puts it, numbness, and ache, suffering the consequences of disconnection and loss from loved ones and friends. Lent is, of course, the season for giving things up but haven't we been doing that for nearly a year already?

Remember that you are dust. This Lent feels different to any other Lent, because the context is so strange.

Remember that you are dust... don't we know that? Death has never come closer to this generation. Never has life felt so fragile.

Somebody told me that their end of workday ritual is to pour themselves a glass of red wine and sit down and listen to the Coronavirus figures on the 6 o'clock news: graphs of infection and mortality.

This is not normal, but we have got used to it. So, given all this, how do we approach Lent in a pandemic year?

We're about to start with the sign of the cross made on our foreheads. In the coming weeks the cross appears four times in different ways – today in a messy form on our foreheads; on Palm Sunday as part of a branch; on Good Friday as something that is carried; and at Easter in the water of baptism.

This symbol of execution and death has been embraced by a community that knows its messy frailty; that knows that the cross is part of a tree whose roots go so deep, and whose branches are like pleading hands. Its strange presence can warm the coldest heart, and we know that within the story is my story: that my life, released from selfishness, into self-giving, can rise up: dust is not the final word.

As Richard Holloway put it many years ago, we are indeed dust, that dreams of glory.

So when we hear the call to repentance, let it be an invitation, not a threat. **Return to the Lord who is gracious and merciful.** *You* are the object of God's mercy and grace. So, enter into that blessedness this Lent. The blessedness that Jesus talks about in the Beatitudes, at the beginning of the sermon on the mount, the blessedness that is found when we go against the grain of selfishness, and rise up to pursue peace, and justice, even if it is a struggle. The blessedness that comes through the positive disciplines of prayer, reflection, encouragement, sharing, resting, celebrating and creating (and, yes, that is a plug for our **Lent course!**); the blessedness that embraces Lent as the healing time, and the dust that dreams of glory, because always, and every year, Lent yearns for its Easter.

Restore in me the joy of your salvation, o'Lord. Amen.