

## Sermon by the Right Rev'd John Stephens

Ash Wednesday 2021

I trust that all of you are well and are bearing up as well as possible under the circumstances. You are all in my prayers in this pandemic time, a time filled with so many aspects to it that it feels quite exhausting. May you know God with you on your walk on this Ash Wednesday and always.

The artist Xu Bing created an art installation which developed quite a stir when it first came out a few years ago. He had collected and stored dust from the streets of New York in the aftermath of 911. He carefully sprinkled the floor of the art gallery with this street dust, a very fine powdery substance made of concrete and other building materials that filled the air on that fateful day. He placed just a very light layer of it on the floor, like flour or soot or sand... or ashes. Gently inscribed in beautiful print into this, the now canvas for his art, were the simple words from a Buddhist poem: "As there is nothing from the first, where does the dust itself collect?" As there is nothing from the first, where does the dust itself collect?

Like any great poems or works of art or music or vision, there are many ways one might interpret this, and there is never but one correct way. My sense is that it seems to speak to the dust that is us. It speaks to the dust that fills the universe, the dust from which God called forth life and the same dust to which we will one day return. It is quite poignant, of course, that the dust he used was from 911, a moment in the world's history that we often use as a marker in time, a moment we all remember, an event that caused us to wonder and question and ponder more deeply the purpose and meaning of life. Dust that seems to speak of tragedy, violence, the need to seek a new way, the need for revision and to rethink what is most important. There have been many of those moments throughout the march of time, 911 is in that queue.

Today, the day we call Ash Wednesday might also be considered such a day. It marks the start of Lent. A holy time in the Church. A season of forty days set aside to walk in the wilderness with Jesus and make more room for humility and deeper calling. Forty days to examine words like fasting and prayer and repentance and meditating on God's word and almsgiving. Forty days to look more closely at how we live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. A gospel centred not nearly as much on ourselves but others, not so much on what I can gain but how I can be transformed. A gospel centred upon a relationship with the one who first breathed life into dust and formed a connection with human beings that is

eternal. A gospel which calls us to reflect on life, death and resurrection. A gospel which calls us to live with a compassion and concern for the forgotten, the ignored, the hated, the rejected, the prodigal, the outsider. A gospel which once we hear it we can never be the same.

And so today we hear these words which speak to all of this and perhaps so much more: Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.

This year Ash Wednesday will look different than perhaps any Ash Wednesday you have ever known. For we cannot be together. We cannot have another person, save someone in our own bubble, impose those ashes on our forehead. We cannot be in community. We cannot consider the precipice which stands before us, the season of Lent, in the full presence of our fellow pilgrims. In some ways it feels like the entire last year, as we have struggled with living in a pandemic, has been like one long season of Lent. For there has been a heaviness to the last 12 months: as we have given up so much of what feeds us and strengthens us. It has been a long time where what we took for granted as normal, has been replaced with distancing, separation and more time to think deeply about what is most important. But let me urge you to consider, “As there is nothing from the first, where does the dust itself collect.” Or our words that intentionally invite us to live a season of Lent filled with deepening our relationship with our Creator and Guide: Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

You see, for the way that I am picturing it, there will be many of us who will putting the ashes on our OWN foreheads this year. We will receive ashes from our parish church but invited to make the sign of the cross with those same ashes on our own. I imagine that there will be many of us standing in front of a mirror in our home and taking a dab of that ash to mark ourselves as we begin this intentional purple-clad pilgrimage. If this is true for you, or even if it is not, still find that mirror. Stand in front of it and look deeply and intently into your own eyes. For most of us might look at our profile or hairstyle or eyeliner in the mirror but don't necessarily look into our own eyes. We don't often look at ourselves from the perspective of God. A perspective far different than most people might consider in this world: a perspective of not questioning if we are capable enough or wise enough or confident enough or young enough or pretty enough or rich enough or tough enough. No... a perspective that tells us that we are beloved. You are beloved of God. You are one for whom Christ lived and died and rose again. You are one to whom the Holy Spirit continues to whisper, peace be with you.

With these thoughts in mind look into your own eyes in front of that mirror and offer the words of our liturgy, the words of our tradition, the words that push aside many other words on this day, and say them to yourself, in faith and in trust: Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

For these are words not of threat or anger or to bring fear. They are words of invitation. Invitation to live the life to which your Baptism called you. A life centred on God's hope for you. A life to draw closer to God amongst us.

As there is nothing from the first, where does the dust itself collect? May it collect on you and guide you to a depth of faith and trust in a God who calls you beloved.



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