

Silent Reflections: Travelling through Lent

Reflections for the start of Lent based on the words and readings of Ash Wednesday

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.

Lent is a time when we, as individuals and as a community of disciples, remember who we are; creatures with a mortal body, who are living in a world which is also limited by time and mortality, but called to a pilgrimage, following Jesus who was crucified but raised beyond this earth to eternal life.

The words used when we are marked with ashes (often from the Palm crosses of the previous year) remind us of this calling and our Lenten pilgrimage. This year we cannot join together physically on Ash Wednesday to be marked as a community seeking to follow Christ, but we are still that community and can still reflect on the pilgrimage we are called to.

When I wrote these reflections I was thinking about physically walking somewhere so that we remind ourselves that we are part of God's created world, and model for ourselves the journeying aspect of Lent. Walking may not help your prayer, and you might choose to pray through the different sections at home, either at one time, or different sections on different days. Use the words, reflections and silence to help you dwell in and on God's love.

Remember that you are dust

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. ...Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so.....And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years... And God saw that it was good.

Genesis 1. 1-3,9-11,14, 18b

From Psalm 139

- 6 Where can I go then from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
- 7 If I climb up to heaven, you are there;
if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.
- 8 If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
- 9 Even there your hand shall lead me,
your right hand hold me fast.
- 10 If I say, 'Surely the darkness will cover me
and the light around me turn to night,'
- 11 Even darkness is no darkness with you;
the night is as clear as the day;
darkness and light to you are both alike.

If you can, stand outside and look around. Look at the ground on which you are standing; look at trees and plants; look at the stones that have been used for buildings; look up at the sky where you can see stars if it is dark, or if it is day time, know that the stars are there but the light of the sun is too great for them to be seen.

*And remember that the whole universe is created from the same atoms and molecules and dust:
stars, plants, mountains, plants – and each one of us*

Lord God, from the great swirl of atoms
and planets
You made the earth we stand on.
You brought life from darkness
You made us from the very dust of the
ground
We remember that we are dust
We thank you for creation;
We praise you for life

Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— then the Lord God formed a human being (*Adam*) from the dust (*adamah*) of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the human whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Genesis 2. 4b-9

In Hebrew *adamah* means “from dust” and the creature created by ‘God is “*adam*” which means a human. Read the passage again, thinking about these words.

Take your eyes from the skies and look at the tiny details of the world around you: the veins on a leaf, the texture of tree bark, the stone of a building...and wonder at the variety of creation, all blessed as good.

Then look at your hands; stand with you feet on the ground, or sit firmly in a chair and give thanks that God created you as you are

12 For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

13 I thank you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvellous are your works, my soul knows well.

From psalm 139



Lord God, in the beginning God made us
From the clay and dust upon the earth
God has made me from love and for love
We remember that we are dust
We remember that we are loved
We thank you for creation;
We praise you for life
We receive your love

Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

John 12. 24-25



If you are in a garden or a park, wood etc, look at all the dead leaves, plants, twigs which are part of the soil, and gradually breaking down to make it good to grow new plants. Our world depends on everything that has lived becoming dust and a fertile place for new life to grow.

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, the Father may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

Ephesians 3. 15-17

Lord God, you have made us for love and for life
Mother God, you have tended us,
you help us grow into people who receive and give love
We remember that we are dust
We remember that we are loved
We thank you for creation; We praise you for life
We receive your love

**Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.
Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.**

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say,
Here I am.
If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger,
the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday



The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

Isaiah 58.6-12

As we enter the season of Lent, we desire to follow Jesus, to grow in discipleship and in faith. It is not just personal sins we repent of, but also a recognition that being human means to be part of a community that is not perfect.

*If you are outside, or going for a walk,
look for paths that others have trodden.
See the footprints of different people.*

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,

*After planting seeds or touching the dust or compost or earth, you will need to wash your hands.
This washing (which we have been doing all year as a commitment to preserve life) is also a sign of our sorrow for sins and mistakes and God's promise to wash away and forgive our sins*



Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.

From psalm 51

Holy God
Our lives are laid bare before you:
Rescue us from the chaos of sin
and through the death of your Son
Bring us healing and make us whole
In Jesus Christ our Lord
Amen

One of the gospels set for Ash Wednesday is this passage.

Read it through then find some soil, of compost (or even dust on a windowsill!)

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

John 8.1-11

I wonder what Jesus wrote in the dust?

I wonder what you would have liked to read if you had been there.

Or might it have been a sign, a symbol?

Rowan Williams was in New York the day the Twin Towers were attacked and wrote a short book reflecting on this event which is called "Writing in the Dust". This is how he ends the book:

But lastly, another picture from the Gospel of John evoked for me by all this, from the stray story of Jesus and the women taken in adultery that is preserved, improbably, in John 8. When the accusation is made, Jesus at first makes no reply but writes with his finger on the ground. What on earth is he doing? Commentators have had plenty of suggestions, but there is one meaning that seems to me obvious in the light of what I think we learned that morning (11th Sep 2001): he hesitates. He does not draw a line, fix an interpretation, tell the woman who she is and what her fate should be. He allows a moment, in which people are given time to see themselves differently precisely because he refuses to make the sense they want. When he lifts his head there is both judgement and release. So this is writing in the dust because it tries to hold that moment for a little longer, long enough for some of our demons to walk away.

Writing in the Dust R Williams p80-81

Lent is time when we are allowed a moment, a time and space to see ourselves differently, and to allow words from God to become part of our lives.

God of all seasons, in your pattern of things
there is a time for keeping and a time for losing
a time for building up and a time for pulling down.

In this holy season of Lent, as we journey with Jesus to the cross,
help us to discern in our lives
what we must lay down and what we must take up;
what we must end and what we must begin.

Give us grace to lead a disciplined life,
in glad obedience and with the joy
which comes from a closer walk with Christ. Amen.

Acknowledgments

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Responses adapted from "Creativity" Moot Community Little Services pocket liturgy 2009

"Writing in the dust" Rowan Williams Hodder and Stoughton 2002

Final prayer from from, Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland, p431