

I never expected 12 months ago that I would ever be leading an Ash Wednesday service over Zoom. In fact 12 months ago I had never heard of Zoom. So much of what is familiar and even normal has changed in the past 12 months. Some things because we had no choice and we may even feel anger for this; and some things for better as we have responded to all this change in mercy and love. It has been a year that has brought into stark reality the limits and also the wonder of humanity.

The words *'Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return'* that are spoke to us each Ash Wednesday, possibly more than any other day in the liturgical calendar reminds us of our humanity – we are reminded that it is by the grace of God we have been created, and it is by the grace of God we are called to rediscover who we are as God's people. It is a reminder of the size and power of God as creator – and the reality of our humanity. On this day we reminded that we are called to face our fears and our challenges with courage, relying on God's love and mercy. We are called to be God's children. Lent in many ways is about bringing us back to the reality of our faith – it is a time to turn and reflect – to take time to focus on what is important– and to be grounded our discipleship in Christ.

The sign of the cross we wear on our foreheads today is not there only one day a year. It is the cross that is marked on our foreheads by the Oil of the Spirit - to mark us as God's in Baptism. It is the mark of our faith – the mark that claims us as God's own – to focus us in our Lenten discipline as we continue in our journey of faith.

In our reading from Matthew Jesus describes as “hypocrites” those who engage in charity work, prayer, fasting, and caring for others for the purpose of making an impression before the public eye. It is easy to presume that this is directed at the Scribes and Pharisees¹ – and at many levels that would be right. But it is reminder to all who long to call themselves faithful followers – including ourselves! There is an invitation in this passage – and in all the readings offered on Ash Wednesday to look at the contradictions in our lives. To have the courage to look at ourselves in the light of Christ and see those things which might not measure up – even to our own standards! So often, it is our good intentions themselves we may need to lay aside and look at anew.

Our Lenten journey give us an opportunity to grow. I time to consider and reflect about the contradictions in our own lives which fail to reflect the intentions of God and a faithful life. This journey draws us back to the promises of our baptisms; to a space where relationships with God and other might be restored. Hopefully it is a time of refreshment. Our Lenten commitment is a conversation and relationship we have with God alone. Jesus was well aware that our human nature leads us to place our pride in many things – even in our faith. And so we are invited to assess what can distract us and create contradictions.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ash-wednesday/commentary-on-matthew-61-6-16-21-10>

Lent is a journey for good reason – the process of emptying ourselves – of considering contradictions – or giving time to reflect on the changes we have endured. Today we are invited through the act of marking our foreheads to make space for this journey in the days ahead – whatever they may hold.

In our service today we will hear these words set to music

We rise again from ashes, from the good we've failed to do.
We rise again from ashes, to create ourselves anew....

Then rise again from ashes, let healing come to pain.
Though spring has turned to winter, and sunshine turned to rain.
The rain we'll use for growing, and create the world anew,
From an offering of ashes, an offering to You.

It reminds us of the changes and the possibilities; it also invites us, as we begin this period of Lent, as we receive our ash cross and are reminded of our humanity – that we are invited to enter a journey of reflection and prayer, as we journey with Christ towards the Cross. Amen