

## Lent 3 2018 – Bishop Jeremy Greaves

4 March 2018

It seems to me that there are two great themes that run right through the season of Lent, and as we stand right near the middle of this season, it is worth taking some time to think about them.

The first of those themes is introduced to us right back at the beginning of Lent... on Ash Wednesday. When we come in penitence to receive the sign of ashes on our foreheads and hear the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

It is a reminder of our frailty, of our humanity, our mortality and our inherent sinfulness. Depending on your perspective it takes us back to the very beginning of the story of faith – to the garden of Eden – or it takes us even further back to the beginning of everything.

In the Garden of Eden story, the name “Adam” is originally not really a name at all. The Hebrew noun adam means “human,” and throughout the story it carries the definite article, so it should be read as “the human” (Hebrew, ha-adam). According to Gen 2:7, God fashioned this human out of the “dust” or “soil of the ground” (Hebrew, afar min ha-adamah). So this first human is a dirt creature, a mud-man or dust-man, made of the very stuff that in turn will sustain human life.

But we know just how frail this dirt creature was, and the writer of Genesis spins a tale of weakness and brokenness and sin that sits behind all of the other stories we read in the scriptures.

At the same time as we hear the story from Genesis, scientists tell us another story... a story that tells us tells us that our bodies are made of the same stuff as the stars. The atoms of which we are made are the same as those in the stars. They were actually created within the stars more than 13 billion years ago and those same particles/energy waves have been recycled over and over for 13 billion years. Our bodies may contain some of the same energy particles as our ancestors, Jesus, Francis of Assisi, flowers, birds, and much more.

So Lent invites us back to the beginning, and to reflect on our lives in the light of those two great stories...

But of course that is only half of the story.

At the imposition of ashes we hear the other great theme of Lent... “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” **“Repent and believe the gospel.”**

“Repent and believe in the gospel” – an invitation into God’s dream for us and for our world.

In that moment, our human frailty and God’s possibilities are held together to become the frame for our Lenten journey.

I recently came across a beautiful poem by the French poet Charles Peguy called “God’s Dream”

The Lord God said: I myself will dream a dream within you,

Good dreaming comes from me, you know.  
My dreams seem impossible,  
not too practical nor for the cautious man or woman;  
a little risky sometimes,  
a trifle brash perhaps.  
Some of my friends prefer to rest more comfortably  
in sounder sleep with visionless eyes.  
But from those who share my dreams  
I ask a little patience,  
a little humour,  
some small courage,  
and a listening heart – I will do the rest.  
Then they will risk and wonder at their daring;  
run, and marvel at their speed;  
build, and stand in awe  
at the beauty of their building.  
You will meet me often  
as you work in your companions who share the risk,  
in your friends who believe in you  
enough to lend their own dreams,  
their own hands,  
their own hearts,  
to your building.

In the people who will stand in your doorway,  
stay awhile  
And walk away knowing that they too can find a dream.  
There will be sun-filled days  
And sometimes a little rain –  
a little variety both come from me.  
So come now, be content.  
It is my dream you dream,  
my house you build,  
my caring you witness;  
my love you share  
And this is the heart of the matter.

It is my dream you dream, my house you build, my caring you witness; my love you share.

Despite your mortality, your frailty, your sin... look what's possible when you join in my dream... when you repent and believe the gospel.

Or as Joseph reminds his brothers in another great story from Genesis, "what you intended for evil, God has used for good."

I have just returned from three weeks in the UK. While I was there I spend 12 days at Canterbury with 32 other new bishops from around the anglican communion. We came from 18 different countries and probably represented the full theological and liturgical diversity of the world-wide church. We ate together and talked together and laughed together and three times each day we would walk across (in the bitter cold) to Canterbury Cathedral to pray together in a place where people have been saying their prayers for nearly 1500 years. And each time we gathered for prayer we were invited to pray the Lord's prayer "in our own language" ... and that wonderful babble, that song of the angels, was beautiful and profound and deeply moving because it said something significant about what God can do despite and in spite of our frailty.

You see, we could have spent the week arguing over various theological differences or matters of sexuality, we could have divided into groups according to our support of one or other matter of church law or doctrine, we might even have argued over the legitimacy of the women bishops amongst us, but instead we ate together and talked together and laughed together... and said our prayers together.

During our visit, towards the end of the week, to Lambeth Palace, the Archbishop of Canterbury reminded us that, “the miracle of the church is not that like-minded people get together. The miracle of the church is that only because of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus the Christ, and the sending of the Holy Spirit, that you can take the most unlike people in the world, who think differently about many things, and you can bring them to the point of washing each other’s feet... a prophetic word to a world that hates otherness and so often turns to bitterness and persecution.”

The journey of Lent takes us from our origins – as dust, or as star dust and brings us to that place... where we wash one another’s feet in readiness to stand at the foot of the cross and then to discover once again the empty tomb and the hope of resurrection with the words from Genesis ringing in our ears, “what you intended for evil, God has used for good.”

Mother Mary Clare of the Sisters of the Love of God at Oxford once said this about prayer, “When you go before God in prayer you cannot leave anything behind. You carry in your heart every person, every incident, every thought, every feeling you have ever had and as you lay yourself before God so you bring all the mess as well. ‘My prayer’ she said, ‘is really one sentence, ‘Here I am, what a mess.’”

Remember that you are dust... repent and believe the gospel.

In this season of the church year, more than at any other time, we come like that before God – a mess – and only God can clean us. Each time we pray we are being cleansed, being restored, being redeemed and renewed in God’s love which watches over us. Each time we pray we are being re-formed out of the dust into a new creation.

In the words of St Augustine, “I find no safe place for myself, save in you in whom all my scattered pieces are gathered together. Surrender to him now all your futile searching. What is withered in you will flower again. Your sickness will be healed. What is faded will be fresh again, and what is warped made whole and strong, and sound. And all that is weak in you will not drag you to the grave. But your wholeness will abide, will remain with you before God, who remains strong and abides forever.”

Human frailty... God’s possibilities.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.

Here I am, what a mess!

Repent and believe the gospel.

It is my dream you dream,  
my house you build,  
my caring you witness;  
my love you share  
And this is the heart of the matter.