

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, 17th February, 2021

One of the reasons that the pandemic has been so damaging is that it has forced us to take a long hard look at ourselves. While some have been labelled essential workers, others have been furloughed or made redundant. Not nice to be told you don't really contribute anything worthwhile or that nobody has any use for you.

And those who are essential are often low paid or employed temporarily. Essential but replaceable, is perhaps the message there. Your work is important, but you are not. And all those people who thought they could do a better job than their children's teachers now have to admit that maybe it's harder than they thought. Bringing up children and teaching them stuff.

Then there is the mortality. Death has perhaps always been on your street or even at the doorstep, but now he's actually knocking he's difficult to ignore. We may have gained a new perspective on what is really important, but it is disturbing how much we still hanker after what is not. Money may not protect you from disease, but poverty certainly doesn't help.

And all that faith in human achievement and scientific knowledge. Turns out to be ineffective in the face of ignorance, arrogance, and self-centredness. But the alternative is a totalitarianism and an abdication of personal responsibility that people have fought long to oppose. Maybe there is more to our existence than just numbers and knowledge. Maybe there is also faith in God.

A microscopic virus has brought low the collective might of humanity. Maybe as well as following the science we should now also be following the theology. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return is the message of Ash Wednesday. For we who are made from the dust of the earth should know ourselves for what we are and where we are going, sooner or later.

Today we begin the season of Lent in the midst of a pandemic. We begin a journey of prayer, discipline, and self-denial at a time when we seem to have been doing a lot of that already. But we also begin a journey of honesty, reflexion, and humility that can shape us and teach us about how to lead better lives for ourselves and for our communities. And we begin a journey of hope which leads to Resurrection on Easter Sunday, new life and new beginnings in the Spring, and the chance to ask ourselves what sort of a society we would like to see in the future.

So before you sink too deeply into depression about the chocolate you will miss, before you lament the lack of a glass of something before bed, before you sigh at the paucity of the portions on your plate, think about how you can use this time most effectively. Think about what we can do as a church to rebuild our lives and our congregations. Pray about the role you are prepared to play in bringing that about. Reflect on the skills and talents and time and money that God has given to you to use in his service and that of his people, and talk about it with your friends and family.

It's not all bad news on Ash Wednesday. It's actually quite refreshingly honest to see ourselves as we really are, as we are today, but also as God has created us to become tomorrow, and before we are called to be with him in eternity.

It seems the wise advice is not to pretend that we will never die, but to live a life that is worthwhile. Not measured in days, months, and years, but in kindness, laughter, and love.

Let this be the beginning of a new day, a new season, a new Lent, and a new life. Amen.