



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Ash Wednesday 2021

The physics department of the slightly eccentric and old-fashioned South London State Boys Grammar I was lucky to go to prided itself on being both exceptional and the most eccentric department of an already fairly quirky place. One teacher would simply put a large cardboard box over the head of a boy who asked what was deemed a stupid question, one teacher often taught through the medium of songs played on his guitar, with his feet up on the large old-fashioned desk on the dais at the front of the lab.

Another teacher, Mr Turner, with his nearly waist length hair ran interactive and theatrical murder mystery weekends in his spare time; he also said as a throw away line one lesson that ‘did we realise that our burgundy blazers were made of stardust?’ That everything around us ultimately is the product of star dust and the collisions and explosions and reactions that are the origin of everything in the cosmos as stars and planets come and go. I think it was in the context of him telling us to not drag them along the ground or scrumple them under our lab stools or something but the thought never left me.

Human beings have always looked up at the stars and wondered and gasped. But, of course, it is just as cosmic and awe inspiring and ‘stardust’ what’s going on down here.

‘Remember thou art but dust, and to dust thou shalt return’.

To be made of dust, of the matter of the universe is to have been made out of billions of years of the story of stars and planets and energy and life leading to this moment. This dust is charged with the grandeur of God, held in life and being by the operation of the Holy Ghost.

Were God not attending to you and me and every tiny sub-molecular part of the cosmos every nanosecond then it wouldn’t die, it would simply cease to be; because all being is held in God’s eternal being, animated through

His gift of life. ‘He’s got the whole world in His hands’ we sang in primary school and we weren’t too far wrong.

‘Remember thou art but dust, and to dust thou shalt return’.

Today as we receive (at our own hands in a Covid safe way) the imposition of ashes on our foreheads we remember our mortality and fragility. These are especially powerful realities for us in the midst of a global pandemic. But we are also anointed with the beloved-ness of our material being. For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son to become dust and ashes and flesh and blood, to die and abolish death, so that flesh and blood might not perish, but find a home in everlasting life. These ashes are our death, and also our freedom. Freedom from death, thanks to the events we will live with Christ in the weeks that follow and together in the Great and Holy Week just as the Prophet Joel bids the people gather to meet God in today’s first reading. *And* freedom from the need to be anything other than what we are: creatures beloved of our creator. Stardust from across the reaches of universe and billions of years of story already told, charged with God’s mysterious magnificence, and destined for His glory.

‘Remember thou art but dust, and to dust thou shalt return’.

There is no need to cling to anything other than the truth of who we are.

Hear again those words of Jesus cutting away the nonsense in today’s Gospel with a machete. Our human frailty and the stupidity of our race, and plenty more besides, push us in every tiny moment and in the course of our lives to cling to wreckage of all shapes and sizes. Self-delusions and manipulation of others, power and money, reputation and opinions, fears and worries, silly hopes and selfish dreams, and its all paper-thin panto costumes. What we are, what is true, is just *that*, and everything else is the nonsense we busy ourselves with for fear of letting go. But if we did, if this little cross of ashes could free us from the un-real, and have us just embrace the truth of who we are... then we might begin to live and love as freely and fully as Jesus did, perfectly and completely.

‘Remember thou art but dust, and to dust thou shalt return’.