

Ash Wednesday 2025

(Ally Barrett)

Isaiah 58.1-12

John 8.1-11

In the reading from Isaiah, the strength and health of the community is dependent on how they treat their most vulnerable members.

Care for the vulnerable is not dependent on their moral status, but on their material and social status: their poverty, their hunger, their nakedness, their experience of oppression. The prophet is clear that in the economy of prayer, our own willingness to participate in how God answers the prayers of those most in need is inextricable from the answering of our own prayers. Our need is inseparable from the needs of others. Our health and wellbeing is inseparable from the health and wellbeing of the whole community. In our solidarity with and empathy for those who are most disenfranchised we will find our own liberation, too.

In the gospel reading, Jesus also chooses to stand alongside the most vulnerable person. She is a woman under threat of death, according to the law. But Jesus is less concerned with her moral status and more concerned with her vulnerability.

The Pharisees and the scribes have instrumentalised and objectified her – she is not a person to them, but has been reduced to a visual aid in their ongoing tussle with Jesus. I wonder, if they were primarily concerned with her sin, her moral state, they would have also have brought the man she was with – perhaps she was easier to subdue, or easier to objectify, and for the sake of their argument they only needed one ‘sinner’.

Jesus refuses to play their game: his silence speaks volumes, and when they insist, he turns the tables and backs them into a corner where their own sin is exposed. She is not the only sinner there. They, too, have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. They have more in common with the woman than they are comfortable admitting. It’s harder to keep her at arm’s length, harder to see her just as an object lesson.

Of all the many things to love about Jesus in this episode, I think what I love most, oddly, is that his attitude of grace towards the woman is also reflected in his attitude to the Scribes and Pharisees.

He offers them a chance to become more self-aware about their own lack, their own need, their own failings, and in that self-awareness, to grow in empathy.

Whenever I read this story, I hear this invitation for me, too. To become more aware of my participation in this community of sinners – for we have all sinned and continue to fall short of the glory of God - and so to participate more fully in the community of God’s grace.

The ash that we receive on our foreheads is both a reminder of our sin – an honest outward expression of the messiness that is normally hidden – and a reminder of God’s forgiveness. Dust and ashes beautifully and symbolically hold together the paradox of our nature and state before God.

Think of St Peter, and the ash of his two charcoal fires: on the night Jesus was betrayed, Peter denied him three times in the warmth and light of a charcoal fire, and on the shore of Galilee on the day of resurrection, it was in the light and warmth of another charcoal fire that Jesus gave Peter a threefold opportunity to affirm his love and a threefold commission that assured him he really was forgiven.

And remember that when we say ‘remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return’ this is not only a reminder of our mortality and our earthly death, but a reminder of our creation, of a God who in Genesis shaped the first human from the dust of the earth, and breathed life into them. The dust from which we came and to which we return is a sign of our belovedness, created by the loving hands of God, who made us out of dust and then never washed his hands of us, who breathed his own divine life into us, and can do so again and again during our earthly life, and in the life of heaven.

Every Lent starts with this act of finger painting – drawing in the dust, if you will. It is an arrestingly powerful, personal and gentle act of human contact through which we might become aware of the powerful, gentle touch of God. We invite Jesus to write in the dust of our ground, to rewrite, redraw, re-shape who we are. Again and again. We are recalled back to the dust so that we can remember our contingency – and our ongoing dependence on God for our recreation.

I wonder if all of this was somehow captured in Jesus’ quiet writing in the dust of the ground in our gospel reading. An acknowledgement of the reality of sin – the sin of the woman, and of the gathered crowd – and at the same time a sign that their story of sin could be rewritten, redrawn.

Unlike the crowd, Jesus cared deeply about the woman’s moral state before God. Cared enough to refuse to condemn her, while at the same time exhorting her to ‘go your way and sin no more’.

God cares about our moral state too. God cares about our sin – enough to go to the cross over it, to be subject to death and resurrection, destruction and re-creation, so that both our life and our death can be held in his loving, dust-covered hands.

We come before God today in our vulnerability, in our awareness of our lack, our need, our failings, the reality that we are sinners among other sinners. We come, willing to wear on the outside a sign of the mess we may be on the inside. But we come, too, confident in the power and love of God to bring life out of death, to turn sin into forgiveness, and turn our destruction into his new creation. Amen.