

# ASHES

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*The ash blessed on Ash Wednesday is formed from the burnt palm-leaves used on the previous Palm Sunday.*

Today the Church calls us, in the voice of an Old Testament Prophet, *to come back to him with all our hearts, fasting, weeping, mourning*. This call is to take precedence over all alternatives: it is a universal summons, touching the whole community, and every member individually, aged and infant, priest and people (and notice that special mention of *bride and bridegroom*: widows do not require a special invitation to mourn: but this summons touches even those who might hold themselves so happy, as to be excused).

I was once discussing the Christian faith with a student, who explained to me that his faith was something simple. My warning lights came on. In a world whose complexity and elaboration constantly multiplies, I instinctively mistrust religious simplicity for complex and sophisticated minds: it is like a mirage which somehow beckons us to rest or escape from the grown-up world of mazes and thickets, traps and wrong turnings. (I wish I found faith simple. But I dread offering *false* consolation to people whose burdens are already more than they can bear.)

Yet he ought certainly to be right: Jesus said that *only little children will enter the Kingdom*, and there is about the call of Christ something which simplifies. *Come, follow me* is certainly a huge challenge: but *Leave everything* has in it a kind of complementary liberation. I wonder the evangelists especially, St Luke, would not have delighted in those television ads which offer to “consolidate” our debts, and to reduce them to “one single affordable payment”. Our very mistrust of such an offer points to our worldly wisdom; Luke would have seen God’s as exactly such an offer. St Paul said: *It is true you have been released from slavery to the world, but only to become a slave to righteousness*.

Today the Church sets before us a symbol of extraordinary, stark simplicity: *ash* – the burnt-out end of combustion, the relic of fire, the terminus of use and spending. It is organic, the sole representative of something that used to be alive: in fact it is the ash of palm leaves, which once blew in the balmy winds of the Mediterranean, and which, transported across the continent, dried and bleached, were last seen waving in the liturgy of Palm Sunday, a sign of delirious welcome to the Messiah, as he entered his Holy City in triumph.

It could not be less alive now. All the beauty and complexity of its former nature is reduced and disfigured: all the meanings it carried, all the human response it elicited, a handful of indeterminate, supine, featureless grit. In the presence of this dust, two messages come to us. The first is sombre. *This, says the Church, this is you. This is you now; this is your future. Dust you are; to dust you will return.*

It is, indeed, unnervingly simple! Once it was not; the crowd who waved their palm-leaves were shouting their homage; in some way they welcomed Jesus to the city of God. Their state was in the extreme complex: the *signs* were of devotion, loyalty, unity. In *truth*, this devotion was short-lived, and its exhausted presence in the ash

is only one of its many meanings. There is, in the nature of the simple dust offered to us today, a damning indictment of our insincerity, our inability to be true to our profession of faith. The remains of last year's holiness! Our moral truthfulness and reliability perish exactly like our flesh: in the simplicity of the dust, there is no admixture of virtue.

So we stand before God today, with ash in our hands and on our heads. But surely we can see something else in this encounter, something which does more to encourage us, than our first metaphor did to discompose us: *The Lord God fashioned man from the dust of the earth, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.*

When we have accepted the fact of death in us, the waste and destruction of burning, when we know that our lives are a handful of dust, fissiparous and void of integrity, our only act of grace is to deliver ourselves into the hand of the God who first picked up the dust of earth, to breathe into it a breath of life.

God is eternally the same, or, to put it precisely, the dust is in his hands once more. It is Lent, and we await the mysterious sound of a wind blowing, which will once more fill the earth with the knowledge of the Creator, who hates nothing he has made, and who forms in this chosen dust the image of his beloved Son.

*Prophesy to the breath, Son of Man! Prophesy, Son of man. Say to the breath: the Lord God says this: come from the four winds, breath, breathe on these dead, so that they come to life.*

His love is without limit, his power is infinite. He will be true to his promises. He will keep faith with us.