

The Revd Jonathan Aitken Homily for Ash Wednesday 26 February 2020
St Matthew's Westminster, 20 Great Peter Street

**THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN
ASH WEDNESDAY HOMILY**

WEDNESDAY 26 FEBRUARY

AT

6.30pm

ST MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER



"Be reconciled to God" declared St Paul in our first reading.

With passionate eloquence the great apostle devoted the next fourteen verses of his second letter to the Corinthians with specific exhortations on how to achieve this reconciliation:

- By purity
- Knowledge
- Patience
- Kindness
- Holiness of spirit
- Genuine love
- Truthful speech
- Power of God
- And with weapons of righteousness in the right hand.

Quite a challenging list for Lent!

And Jesus was also specific in our Gospel reading, giving important commands on the Sermon on the Mount about

- Almsgiving,
- Praying
- and Fasting.

So these two Ash Wednesday readings are so replete with good Lenten advice and also so impossible to analyse quickly that you will be relieved to know that this evening's homily is restricted to 3 minutes.

So let's leave the specifics to be pondered on and prayed over privately during the next six weeks of Lent.

But how do they relate to the traditionally reflective and penitential Service of our Ash Wednesday liturgy.

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A few months ago, I presided over my first funeral as a newly ordained priest. It concluded in a beautiful Cotswold churchyard in Bibury Oxfordshire.

As the body of my old friend and school contemporary was lowered into the grave, the Book of Common Prayers office of the burial of the dead required me to cast handfuls of dusty earth on to his coffin

Saying the words:

- Earth to earth
- Ashes to ashes
- Dust to dust

It is the same thought and almost the same words that form the centrepiece of our Ash Wednesday liturgy.

In a few moments we will be using language which derives from the story of the Fall in Genesis 3:19 when God tells Adam:

“Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return”.

Now on the other 364 days in the year, most of us tend not to do much thinking about our return to dust – our death.

But this is the day when perhaps we should harken to our liturgy and the lessons to be learned from it.

We should pause in our daily pressures as creatures of earthly time and pray about our prospects for heavenly eternity.

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A few days ago, I had a cup of coffee in Cambridge with former Archbishop Rowan Williams.

He was packing up his books and furniture for his move to retire to Wales.

I asked him what he was going to do in his so-called retirement.

Unexpectedly he replied "Amongst other things I am going to prepare for a good Christian death".

That's a profound thought for this evening.

An Ash Wednesday Service gives us a space to reflect on our own mortality, our sinfulness and our need to repent.

Repentance, like the happiness that flows from it, is an inside job.

It is a paradox that while marking our faces with the external ashes of penitence, we truly need to go away to start work on the internal effort of *metanoia* the Greek word for repentance which translates as: "*Changing your heart and mind*".

And this is a process as Jesus reminded us on the Sermon on the Mount which is best done in secret
in the privacy in our hearts and minds and prayers.

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The traditional Old Testament reading for Ash Wednesday comes from the Book of Joel and begins with these magnificent words:

“Rend your heart and not your garments
Return to the Lord your God
For he is gracious and merciful
Slow to anger and abounding in love”.

We will inevitably one day return from ashes to ashes and from dust to dust

But right here and now let us resolve to return first to the Lord our God

To reconcile ourselves to him

And to experience the joy of his forgiveness and in love.

This is a journey which can begin today on this

Ash Wednesday at the start of Lent

Amen