

## Homily for Ash Wednesday

*A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, on Wednesday 22 February 2023 (Ash Wednesday), by The Right Reverend Dr Michael Langrish, Chairman of the Trustees of Pusey House and sometime Bishop of Exeter*

**Joel 2.12-17; James 4.1-10; Matthew 6.16-21**

**I**F you're looking for a novel to read during Lent, let me suggest *Christ Re-crucified* by Nikos Kazantzakis. The setting is the aftermath of the First World War, when there was still a Turkish presence in Greece and the political map of the Balkans was being redrawn. The story begins with some refugees arriving in a Greek Christian village, surrounded by Moslem Turks. They are themselves Greeks who have been uprooted by the Turkish army and arrive in the village looking for refuge and assistance. But this village to which they have come is rich and comfortable; the villagers are jealous of their possessions and security; and they don't want to put this at risk by doing anything that might upset the Turkish authorities. So, rather than welcoming the refugees, as fellow Christians, fellow Greeks and - most of all - as people in need, they see these outsiders as a worrying threat to their whole way of life. As the story unfolds, these Greek Christian villagers end up by joining league with the Turkish Muslim authorities to starve the refugees into submission and send them packing on their way. As a story of refugee horror and human anguish, at least, it has contemporary resonance for us and the refugee crisis of our day.

Yet there is more to engage us than that. For there is another story going on at the same time.

You see, at the beginning of the novel, before the refugees arrive; we meet the villagers making arrangements for their annual Passion play - a very important part of their preparations for Easter. Different villagers have to be chosen to play the different parts; and one very popular and well-liked young man - Manolios - is the first to be picked: to play the part of Christ.

But then, when the refugees come, this same Manolios shocks the village by taking their side and standing up for them. He then provokes the villagers' anger and outrage even more when he decides to help the refugees take possession of some land and goods, which have been given to them by one of his friends, who was, in the Passion play, chosen to take the part of the Apostle John.

Gradually, Manolios becomes the focus for all the hostility of the community towards the outsider. All their rage at the disruption of their life becomes focused on him. As the book pushes towards its climax, what we see happening is how the various villagers that had been chosen to act the different parts in the coming play begin to live out those characters in a very subtle manner in their real, everyday lives. So, in the final scene, the local priest unconsciously plays the part of Caiaphas; and the local Turkish army commander that of Pontius Pilate, as they conspire together to get rid of Manolios, this disrupter of society, this embarrassing thorn in their side.

And (spoiler alert) the novel comes to an abrupt close when, one morning, Manolios is taken out and, by those same villagers who had chosen him to play the part of Christ, is lynched from a nearby tree.

We are then left to guess what happened next. Presumably another Christ was chosen - a more compliant one this time, one that would keep the gospel story well within the confines of the play, and not begin to take it all so seriously that he lets it spill over into everyday life.

Just a play - or everyday life?

The real thing - or just a sham?

That's the theme of that book; it's also the theme of Ash Wednesday; just as it is one of the great themes of the Bible from beginning to end.

Time and time again - through both Testaments, Old and New - is this call, and warning, to distinguish between the sham and the real. From the time of the arrival of the Hebrew people in the Promised Land to the emergence of the New Testament Church; from the thunderings of the prophets to the writings of the apostles, central to Jesus' teaching itself, over and over again, there comes this warning against hypocrisy and play-acting and sham. A warning against taking for granted the promises of God, against being satisfied with the name of being God's people, without actually bothering about the reality and what this really means in practice.

And so, the keynote for making, and keeping, a good Lent is to be found so very clearly in our first reading today, from the prophet Joel, who so vividly conveys to us God's constant and passionate summons to his people in each and every age - both in the prophet's own time, and in our time, too. *'Even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.'* The prophet is worried about the people's lack of integrity. This shows in their lack of sensitivity to what is going on around them. Even while they are paying scrupulous attention to their religious rites and ceremonies, they are ignoring, or failing to do anything about, the lack of justice, truth and peace all around them. So, he demands, *'<sup>13</sup>rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.'* That is what this season of Lent - and its associated penance, fasting, almsgiving and prayer - is really all about, and what it is meant to achieve.

And the symbol that today we are offered to recall us to this invitation to drop the illusions and to get real - real about ourselves, and real about God - is that of the **ash** to be placed on our foreheads, in the sign of the cross, with the words: *'Remember you are dust and to dust you will return.'*

All those pretensions, all those pretences about ourselves, and what we are really like - the little masks that we like to put on to deceive others, ourselves, God; we are invited to see as the artificial, insubstantial things that they are. They're not real, they're not substantial, they can't last. In time they are bound to crumble away.

So why bother with the games, cut the sham and get real?

The men and women who puff themselves up and feel so powerful (and we all have our own ways of doing this from time to time), will one day be nothing but decaying dust – without the grace of God. The same is true of nations – and Joel is very clear about this as well: the nation, the community, that likes to boast how special and great it is, that likes to throw its weight around, and try to impose its will on others, risks discovering all too quickly just how weak it really is, if its life is not grounded in the eternal values and truths of God.

*‘Remember you are dust and to dust you will return.’* Those words are not meant to frighten us, or cow us, but rather to encourage us and support us, through helping us to acknowledge the truth about ourselves and our world, and to get real in living with that rather than with some unrealistic fantasy.

There is in fact a liberation and a deeper strength that comes from not having to pretend to be something that are not. For it is then that God really can begin to use us in his way for the good of this world. *‘Blessed are the meek; for it is they who will inherit the earth’* said Jesus *‘my strength is made perfect in weakness’*.

As I look at today’s world, the symbol of the imposition of the ashes at the heart of today’s liturgy seems more real, and more needed than ever. It is not just an old-fashioned religious ceremony. Rather, it is a very contemporary prophetic witness, reminding us, weak and fragile as each of may feel ourselves to be, that the only ‘hopeful life’ in what feels to be an increasingly dangerous, unpredictable, and fragmented world, is a life of integrity, a life of courageous honesty, a life of truth. In fact, it is to us, precisely the weak and fragile, who are given the task of living the truth, guarding the truth, advocating the truth, and resisting all who would undermine it. Whereas the reality is that, in far too many parts of the world today, that truth is, in fact, being crushed on a daily basis – it is being crushed in the violence of South Sudan, a nation that came into being proclaiming itself to be a **Christian** nation against the Muslim, but showing so little of the Kingdom of God in its so young life. It is being crushed in the atrocities meted out daily to the peoples of Ukraine and Syria, under the, at the very least blind, eye of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is being crushed in the poverty or marginalisation of the old, the sick, the stranger in our own still very rich country whenever it pretends that it has not the resources to respond to their need.

We, as followers of Christ, are called to be sentinels and watchmen against such things; and against the attitudes behind them that we might find in ourselves – pride, selfishness, dishonesty, fear.

And the tools that Lent has traditionally given us – fasting, prayer, almsgiving, penance – are **all** designed to help in this, as each is designed to turn our concerns away **from ourselves**, and **towards others**, but - most of all - **towards God**.

And so, in our Gospel reading, Jesus warns against the sham, the self-deception, of doing even these things - fasting, prayer, almsgiving, penance, even the right things - for the wrong reason; the outward display, rather than the deep inner life; the concern with the short term and convenient, rather than with the things that last for eternity, a character being shaped by the mind of God.

Today's liturgy asks of us: 'What is the face, the identity, that you – as individuals, as a church – present to the world?' Is it sham or is it real? And true not according to some criteria of our own choosing, or how we feel, but with reference to the creative, salvific, and eschatological purposes of God in which is to be found our true DNA.

*"Remember that you are dust, to dust you shall return"*. The invitation is to see ourselves as we truly are; to see ourselves as we were made to be rather than what we pretend or erroneously want to be; to see ourselves just for a moment through God's eyes – to, at least in this moment, to turn away from the tendency to make-believe and sham which is there in us all, and let in the light and the mercy of God's forgiveness and grace. And so the words go on: *"Turn away from sin, and be faithful to Christ"*.

That's the theme of Scripture, that's the theme of Lent, that's the theme for today. May that be the theme for each and every one of us, in each and every day of our lives as well.