

Palm Crosses

Yesterday morning a group of us gathered in the yard at the back of Church House to burn about 150 of the palm crosses that were handed out last year, and which have probably given us some comfort, or joy, or assurance as we have looked at them throughout the year in our homes. I have had mine on the window which my desk is positioned in front of, and which has been my companion through my devotions, and work at that desk throughout the year. It also faces outwards into the road from which I live, and was no doubt seen by many passers-by. So, it was with a hint of sadness that that cross became ash yesterday, and my window is now bare to all who look at it.

However, when we were burning the crosses and grinding the ash which they became, three or four people commented that this felt like a metaphor for the cycle of our lives. The crosses had been freely received, they had made a difference in people's lives, and they had been freely given back, and now their time, at least as a palm cross, had ended as they were reduced to ash. People saw the similarities between our own births, lives and deaths.

Ash Wednesday

This is very much the point of Ash Wednesday, and the imposition of ashes, with those words “you are dust and to dust you shall return” - a powerful, poignant and symbolic reminder of our own humanity, fragility and mortality.

And this is important for us to remember because this is how we were created. The book of Genesis, from which the imposition words I've just quoted are taken from, tell us that we are created in God's image, and our job is to reflect that image in the created world. We are not spiritual creatures, we are earthly beings, and

our primary vocation is not to escape this world to become some sort of soulful entity, but to become fully human and reflect the image of the creator God here on earth.

Being fully human - challenge

Of course, being earthly and human comes with huge challenges. We look at the world at the moment and we see some of the challenges that we're facing.

Anyone who has been watching the news recently will be aware of the trajectory that the western European nations are currently on regarding the war in Ukraine. The headlines are dominated by war and conflict, with bombs and bullets and trade and tariffs.

Of course this happening in many places around the world, but currently it feels very close to home. Even closer to home, today just up the road, was the funeral of 12-year-old boy Leo Ross, murdered in January.

For us personally, and as the ash and the words of imposition remind us, death is the one thing that we can all be certain to face; the death of others and of course our own mortality, our own death.

On Ash Wednesday, these challenges look us square in the face.

Reflecting Gods image - hope

However, as we face up to those challenges, we reflect back into them God's image that has been placed within us. Humanity has faced challenges of death and destruction since the earliest times, and is still here.

As people of faith, we see this time and time again in the Bible; the way the story of God's people were on the brink of destruction through slavery or exile or idolatry, and were, by the grace of God, rescued.

This is seen in the book of Job, that we have heard from tonight. We do not often hear from it, but it is a profound testament to hope in the face of intense suffering. Job, a man of unwavering faith, endures devastating losses—his family, health and wealth are stripped away. Despite his despair, Job clings to the belief that God is sovereign and just, even when he cannot comprehend the reasons for his suffering.

Throughout his trials, Job expresses both anguish and trust. His declaration, "I know that my Redeemer lives" (Job 19:25), highlights his enduring hope in God's ultimate justice and restoration. Job's honesty with God demonstrates that hope does not prevent or take away pain but sustains the human spirit during hardship.

In the end, God's response and the restoration of Job's fortunes affirm the message that hope rooted in faith is never misplaced.

If Job demonstrates that faith is looking at the world around him as it really is, and still believes in God, then his hope is that God will be true to his promises, and bring joy out of challenge and life out of death.

This is also our hope. Like Job, we can be hurt and devastated but Christian hope recognises that in this world, right now with all its problems, suffering and sin, we can cling on to God's promises and we can trust him even though we can only see a little bit of the bigger picture.

Our hope isn't shallow like many of the spurious spiritualities that pervade our society today; and it doesn't rely on us having all the answers. Our hope is faithful, just as our faith is hopeful.

Our hope is given substance from those who have gone before us, and has within it a trust in those promises given to us by Jesus, who was, as well as being fully divine, the most fully human there has

ever been, and who reflected God's glory into this world more than anyone else could ever do.

Lent journey

Just as Jesus' time in the wilderness followed immediately from his baptism, Lent may have been closer to Epiphany, but it soon became connected to Easter.

This reflects our hope as Christians. We are called to be people of hope in the world now, in fact it is more important than ever that we as Christians talk about our belief that despite everything, Jesus is Lord right now. But our hope also lies in a future time; the time at the end of the earthly journey, when sin, death and destruction have done their worst, and when what was promised on that first Easter day, comes to fulfilment. Just as Lent becomes Easter, so death and destruction become resurrection and new creation.

So as we receive the ashen cross a little later, and hear those words 'you are dust and to dust you shall return', do reflect on how only you, in your own unique and faithful way, can bring that current and future hope that reflects God's image, into our world today. Amen

Rev'd Richard Haynes Ash Wednesday 2025