

Ash Wednesday

2 March

Oh I have slipped the surly bonds of earth...

Put out my hand, and touched the face of God. [*High Flight* by John Gillespie Magee]

But the earth is where it all begins. Not for nothing did God scoop up a handful of earth and say that, contained herein, is all that there is, all that there needs to be, the material of the universe, and the humus which gives it life, insinuating itself into the inert granules of dust and saying to it, 'you will be more than this!'

This is where we begin. Formed from the dust of the earth, breathed upon by God, we arise, humus becoming human, woman and man standing upright, our feet planted on the God-given good earth, and yet our gaze set towards the horizons of our hopes, our expectations, and our overweening ambitions.

For we craft the good earth as we see fit. We mould it into the shapes that proclaim who we are, and the aspirations we have, the blessings we wish to share: cities and schools, hospitals and cathedrals, ploughshares and wedding rings; but we also construct less than admirable expressions of our humanity, our defensiveness and destructive tendencies; fortresses and prisons; torture chambers and concentration camps; swords and manacles. We aspire and conspire, we elevate and degrade.

That is why we are here, now, to account for the earth that we have scooped up and cast before the winds. Where, and how, does it fall? And are we tempted, as we seem so often to do, to detach our humanity from the humus that formed us, and pretend we are gods ourselves? Can we so readily slip the surly bonds of earth?

No. We are not only inextricably linked to the humus that gives us our name, we *are* the humus that gives us our name: dust ye are, and dust ye shall be! This is not a cry of despair, but a recognition of the responsibility we have for the earth that we shape. What we create are not just monuments to nobility or folly, but reflections of who we are and who we are to become.

Therefore the ruination of the earth is really the ruination of ourselves, and the nurturing of the earth is really the nurturing of ourselves. Thus shall it ever be. And to realise this is to realise our humanity, that we are here to serve each other; our humility, so that we never think that only we have the answers, but need each other to continue our search; and our humour, so that we can see joy infiltrating all we undertake; all of which root us firmly in the great good earth which gives us shape, and all of which express the God-centredness of our shared exploring.

We need to nurture the earth, the dust, the humus, because we need to nurture ourselves. And so, we kneel before the throne of God, and receive the dust, the ash, which is not only a sign of creation's fall, but which is also a sign of its inexorable and glorious potential to rise again.

We reach out our hand and touch the face of God, not by slipping the surly bonds of earth, but by placing that hallowed earth in the palm of our hand, and seeing our humanity grow from its fertile goodness.