

Ash Wednesday

1 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 the 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 emerging into 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: cities and schools, hospitals and cathedrals, ploughshares and wedding rings; but also 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? 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, our humility and our humour, 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 because we need to nurture ourselves. Anything else leads to destruction. And so, we kneel before the throne of God, and receive the good earth, the dust, the ash, not only as a sign of creation's fall, but also of its inexorable and glorious rising again.