



Ash Wednesday
Wednesday 9 March 2011

Falling we stand

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Readings: 2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10; John 8.1-11

Last Saturday was a busy day for me. I woke up wondering how I was going to get everything done. There was the Lent Course to send out to ninety people with letters to each one, the Parish Report to write, an article I had promised someone I would write, and a Lent service to prepare and a whole host of people I needed to phone quite apart from a load of domestic stuff like washing and cleaning and shopping. I sat in Morning Prayer not praying at all but thinking of what I should be doing and as soon as prayer was over forgot about breakfast and went straight into the office anxious to get started. It was while I was filling envelopes that I noticed that sometime in the last half hour an e-mail had popped into my computer inbox, an instant e-mail from the other side of the world, and from another part of my life, telling me that one of my closest colleagues and friends had died that day, in an accident at the age of fifty two. Everything stopped: the rush, the morning, the preparations, the anxieties. All was changed in the moment of reading that e-mail.

I turned from the computer screen, and out of the window towards the church and Trafalgar Square, and the buses and the crowds, and my day disappeared behind the salty haze as all my thoughts and memories were with a friend who had been so much part of my life, who had inspired my faith, dared me to believe... and now so suddenly, in a few moments on a computer screen, was gone. So instead of writing services or posting Lent courses I was unravelling the memories of a life, and the meaning of my own life in relation to this death.

Death is a subject we seldom talk about in a direct way. We kind of put it away. It is a conversation stopper. We talk about the future, the health care plan, the insurance, the hospital, the doctors, the medicine. It is of course far more difficult to talk about death. And yet death is the one most important single event which will happen to all of us. This Ash Wednesday service reminds us of that fact in a very stark and confrontational way. "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." But why do we need to remember we are dust? I think it is because in that acknowledgement truth begins. Real truth. Confronting these moments in our lives can be like being stripped of the delusions and dressings and realising who we are and what we really believe in. These moments can feel like falling. But as Julian of Norwich who is the focus for our Lent course writes, "falling we stand." What does she mean? She writes **"In God's sight we do not fall, in our sight we do not stand. As I see it both of these are true. But the deeper insight belongs to God."**

Well as I thought about it, what I think she means is this - All of us create images about ourselves and our lives - patterns of life hopes and desires that can become very pervasive and convincing to others around us and ourselves too. At first these ideas may seem like wishful thinking but as they progress they become ever more convincing. These constructs may include what we think it means to be successful, or happy, or secure, the kind of house and possessions we have, or think we need to have, our reputation and achievements, our financial assets, what our friends think of us, our work and position and seniority and ambitions, and what we think it means to be happy and secure. And around these images and ideals and constructs are fears and anxieties - "yes but what happens if it all goes wrong and the pack of cards comes tumbling down? What happens if we fall?" And something does happen. We do not live charmed lives, not all of the time anyway. At some moment in our lives we glimpse a different reality, the reality that we are mortal, vulnerable, human beings,

who do not know the answers. Human beings who despite our grand delusions are infinitesimally small in comparison to the universe and the billions and billions and billions of light years that separate us from the stars that will one day all go out. Have any of you been listening to Professor Brian Cox and his mind blowing television series about the wonders of the universe? Last week he explored the wonders of the solar system and the arrow of time. "People are no more enduring than grass, the grass withers... the flowers fade" as the prophet Isaiah wrote. The reality of our mortality is something that will confront us all in moments of loss, in times of both grief and joy, in moments of love that we will long to last for ever, perhaps too when things seem to have gone badly wrong and events have defied our control. Or when life seems to be running out of hand, like in Libya where the idealism and longing for freedom has come face to face with violence and repression and the reality is escalating horror - death and hospitals filled with the wounded.

In the acknowledgement of this mortality, we fall, sometimes fall so far that we believe we can never ever rise again, but it is also here at the bottom of the fall that real truth is born and we learn what it means to be human beings, mortal human beings, eternally loved by God. It is in the acknowledgement of this vulnerable reality that in God's eyes we stand.

Look at our Gospel today. Here the pride and anger of the Scribes and Pharisees confront and the crowd they have created, confront Jesus and a woman taken in adultery. If we picture it the woman is the scapegoat fallen to the ground and Jesus the only one who separates her from the untruth and hypocrisy of the lynch mob. And what does Jesus do? He bends down to the ground and writes in the soil. Truth will begin down, down at the very bottom, in the earth, in the acknowledgement of our humanity, in the acknowledgement that we are all mortal, that we all fall. Here we witness this divine reversal - that it is the accused woman on the ground who is raised up, who stands up, free to go her way, while the crowd who condemn her are called to recognise their own fallenness, in order that they too may stand.

This is the meaning I believe of Lent. It is the time to bend down and touch the earth and to remember that we too, despite all our well made plans and achievements are also dust and that it is in the acknowledgement of this truth that we become aware of God and the greater miracle of his love for us. So even the grief of facing an illness, or a struggle, or a death leads us somehow into a greater truth: a truth centred and held in the palm of the love of God. Falling we stand. It is here with Christ and the woman on the ground that we recognize the meaning of the humility to which we are all called: to make a place and a space for God in our lives, to stand in the beam of his love and to be redeemed by that love. To be centred in God's love like the woman on the ground before her judges is to be saved by that love.

The Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book this year is called *Barefoot Disciple, Walking the Way of Passionate Humility* by Stephen Cherry. In his introduction the Archbishop says "real wisdom in our lives demands that we take the risk of being overwhelmed. This vulnerable willingness to become a stranger and lose our bearings is the key to our entry into the world of Jesus Christ."

Perhaps it is difficult if not impossible to acquire humility intentionally. But true humility is a gift of letting go, of discovering our true meaning when we are not trying to capture it and possess it. Everitt Washington writes:

Being humble, then is like trying to catch air in your hands. The faster we close our fingers, the faster the air spurts away. But if we hold our hands up, arms outstretched, then air will come to rest in our hands. To experience humility then is not to grasp or strive towards it but to rest as we seek to bless others.

When I told our vicar Nick about the death of my friend and colleague Caulton Weris he said: "I think Caulton will be with you all this Lent." Yes, and beyond. I am sure of this, this falling down can also be a lifting up into the presence and the meaning of God in which our true meaning is found. Today with a sign of ash you will be reminded of your mortality. Today with bread and wine you will be offered God's life and love.