

Come and See 2025

Week 1: Fashioned from Earth

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. Every year there is a simple and moving ritual which takes us to right to the heart of what it means to be human. The congregation come forward one by one. The minister takes some ash, which is made by burning the palm crosses from last year, so it's linked directly with Holy Week and Easter. Then the minister makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of each man, woman and child as an echo of our baptism and says these solemn words:

*Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.
Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.*

Welcome to Come and See. We're exploring what it means to be human and what it means to be baptised as a Christian. The two questions belong very closely together. They are the biggest questions anyone will face in their lives. Who are we? What do we think we are made of? What are we made for?

The questions run through the whole of our lives. A child asks them in wonder. Who am I? A young person might ask them at the threshold of their adult lives. What is the gift of life for? How do I use it well? We all ask them at life's great milestones and crossroads: the birth of our children; significant birthdays; the illness of someone we love; the first time we hold our grandchildren. We ask them as we age and at the very end of our lives. Who are we? What are we really made of? What are we made for?

They're questions which inform debate across the whole world at the present time: questions of human identity in relation to the climate crisis; to war and poverty; to technology. The answers we give shape our whole lives: the choices we make; where we invest our time; the priorities we set.

Our starting point on this journey are those words at the imposition of the ashes, this annual echo of Christian baptism.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.

There is a clear answer to the question what we are made of. You are dust and to dust you will return. The words are taken from the Book of Genesis and the story of creation. In Genesis 2.7 we read this:

“Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being”

You and I are made from dust, from earth – but not only from earth as that verse goes on to say. Later in verse 19, we read that out of the ground God formed every animal of the field, every bird of the air and brought them to the man. It’s picture language, but with deep trust at the centre.

We are made from earth, from dust, just like the animals and birds with whom we share this world. The Hebrew name for man in the Bible is of course Adam. The Hebrew word for the ground is Adamah. We’re fashioned from the earth.

And in the next chapter, after Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, God says this to the man:

“You are dust and to dust you shall return”.

The words at the imposition of ashes are a direct quotation from this verse in Genesis 3.19.

So what does it mean to be made from dust and return to dust? We know that human bodies and minds are incredible. But we know we are made from the same elements which make up the rest of the universe: oxygen; carbon; hydrogen; calcium and phosphorus make up 99% of the atoms in our bodies. There are traces of other elements all necessary for life.

Those elements are combined into bones and muscles and organs which together make up our physical bodies. They need to be sustained with food and water and oxygen. After we have died our bodies will decompose. We are dust and to dust we will return.

So we are made of the same things as the rest of the earth – but that is only the beginning of what we mean by being made from the ground, being made of dust.

It's part of the mystery of being human that we are like the animals but not like the animals: we are more conscious and aware. We long for meaning and purpose beyond ourselves and we need that meaning and purpose and story to live well.

We know we are mortal but we have a longing for immortality. We are fragile and frail but we long to be strong. We enter this world and we leave it alone but we long for fellowship and community: we need relationships to thrive. Most of all our souls long for God: to know our creator and to discover who we are even though we may not know exactly what we long for. For much of our lives we are hungry and thirsty for meaning.

And we know that we are made of the earth in another sense as well. We have a conscience. We know right from wrong. But we also know that humans have an invariable, universal tendency to mess things up; to hurt and not to heal. The Bible calls this universal tendency to wrong, sin: human pride, selfishness, greed and division.

We see this sin in the world around us on a massive scale: our greed destroying the very fabric of the planet; the horrors of war unleashed for human glory; the fear which separates us from our neighbours; the injustice which sees so many live in poverty while others have so much. We are creatures of the dust.

But we see this sin within us as well: the challenge and difficulty of living together in families; our own selfishness; the damage we can do to each another; the remorse we feel often as we look back over our lives; the pride and fear which dominates and shapes our character. We know that often, in Paul's words, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7.19).

Earlier in Romans Paul underlines this universal human experience: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 2.23). We are made from dust, from the earth, feeble and frail yet an essential part of our humanity is to long for something better.

Standing in the corner of every parish church you will find a permanent symbol of renewal and transformation. Sometimes it will be near the door. It may be hidden behind chairs or covered in books. You may never have noticed it being used. Sometimes it will be the most ancient part of the building.

This great, permanent symbol of renewal and transformation in every church is called a font. The font is the place of baptism. The font is where people made of dust and earth are washed and forgiven and made new and born again of water and the Spirit. The font is the place we are set free from slavery and begin a new life with Christ. The font is the place where we begin the lifelong journey of turning away from sin and towards faith in Christ. The font is the place where we make with water the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of salvation.

The power of the font does not lie in its beauty or architecture. The font is a sign of a much greater spiritual reality. This greater reality is the life and death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the fire and breath of God. When we are baptised we are baptised into Jesus. God sent his Son Jesus into the world to save us and to call us to repentance and faith.

This is why when candidates come to be baptised and confirmed there is first a turning away from darkness and that part of our nature which is bound and tied to the earth:

Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?

I reject them

Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil?

I renounce them

Do you repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour?

I repent of them

This is the turning away from darkness. And then the turning to the light:

Do you turn to Christ as Saviour?

I turn to Christ

Do you submit to Christ as Lord

I submit to Christ

Do you come to Christ the way, the truth and the life

I come to Christ

Baptism is a profound and wonderful exploration of all that it means to be human. The ancient world believed that all of life was made of four elements: earth, water, wind and fire. Each of these elements has a part to play in the imagery and understanding of baptism.

Today we begin at the beginning of Lent with earth: dust you are and to dust you will return.

Next week we will begin to explore the waters of baptism.

Come and see.