

First Sunday in Lent (Matthew 4:1-11, Romans 5:12-19, and Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7)

On Wednesday, Christians across the world received ash crosses on their foreheads, with the words: “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.”

It marked the beginning of Lent, 40 days of preparation before Easter, as we turn towards the cross.

This mirrors Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness, as we heard in our Gospel reading. Like a metal being forged in the fire, Jesus was tested, as he turned towards Jerusalem and the suffering he would undergo at the cross.

Where Adam fails, Jesus succeeds. As St Paul describes, Jesus is the Second Adam, the blueprint for a new humanity, the new creation. Adam and Eve reject their creatureliness, their limits. For them, the world is not enough! They seek life without limits, and heed the serpents words to eat from the fruit and “become like god.”

But isn’t “temptation” the opposite of this? Aren’t we supposed to resist or escape the limits of the world and our earthly desires, to engage with our more spiritual side– (as if the two are in competition)?

However, the opposite is true, precisely because we are creaturely, we need to acknowledge our bodily desires and needs. We need to recognise that what is good and wholesome can become twisted as the centre of our worth, identity, and worship.

Jesus’ time in the wilderness shows us that the temptation he faced was to ignore the limits of the world, or take shortcuts over created reality.

“Turn these stones into bread”

“Throw yourself off the temple, and let God’s angels rescue you— then everyone will believe that you *really are* the Son of God”

“I can give you the whole world. That’s what you want isn’t it!? Just bend you knee and worship me, and all this will be yours”

All of these temptations are shortcuts, much easier paths than the way of the cross.

But Jesus resists this cheap way of salvation. Jesus’ response to the temptations, his life, death, and resurrection shows God’s utter commitment to the world. It reveals that God brings salvation, the new creation, not by

clicking his fingers and leaping over the world, but patiently *through* the world.

Angels do come and wait on Jesus, but only after he's been tested. The resurrection does come, but only through the cross.

So, what about us this Lent?

This is perhaps a reminder for us that holiness, growth into God's love, is not about a miraculous escape plan from the world, but within the limits of who we are. We can only begin this journey into holiness by beginning with where we are and who we are, as people who fail and come up short.

As the ash reminds us, we are dust, finite, limited and broken. But as the cross reminds us, we are loved by God.

Speaking of our limits is quite counter-cultural and is not something that is terribly popular today. It can be weaponised as talk of our limits can become a sort of "know your place," "know your limits." But it can also be *liberating*.

England cricket team: "baz ball", not afraid to lose, not afraid to fail! No longer playing within themselves.

Ironically, recognising they will lose sometimes has freed them to play to their full capacity!

So too, knowing we are limited creatures, but beloved by God (dust and cross), we are liberated from fear of failure into who we are made to be.

Of course, we shouldn't seek failure out. Or, use failure as a mechanism for grace— an excuse to do what we want. That is another shortcut, the cheap view of grace that wants stones to be turned to bread, that wants an evacuation into heaven. Not heaven on earth, just heaven, without the difficulties of earth.

But in Christ we see God's utter commitment to his world, we see that our failure is not final. In the nakedness of our sin, we discover we do not have it all together, that we are NOT God. Yet, we also discover more deeply our dependence on God, the source of our life and love, as all our other false securities are relativised.

These themes of failure and seeking false security are echoed in the song "Smoke," by Ghanian-British rapper, Headie One, who describes his experience growing up amongst criminality, being in and out of jail:

Smoke, dust
Phones, drugs
Socialise, cuffs
No love

Love, no love, I know how it feels to be forgotten
Months gone by and I haven't heard from my broskis (brothers)
Tap water diluted orange, it's a Northern jail, and I'm coloured
Trust? I can't even trust myself
They ask why my health is wealth
(Do you know) How many risky cards (I) got dealt?
You know how many lonely nights I felt?
All the times I got an empty promise
I can't trust a soul, I just trust my pockets
...

Hugs, no hugs, I had to hug my thoughts
Nobody came to court,
The judge thought this is something I haven't done before

I was in court relyin' on luck
Touch that studio and now I'm up
The youth say they wanna be like me
But it was ups and downs
Pains and frowns, it was done before I saw the Sun.

Smoke, dust
Phones, drugs
Soc', cuffs
No love (*Told me turn*)

This truthfully, raw, account of his life, shows it was through utter failure and brokenness that he came to be where he is now.

Without love, he turned to wealth and success as the only thing he could trust.

Now, in his success, he describes the young people who want to be like him. Yet, he says; it was ups and downs, pains and frowns, it was done before I saw the Sun... where he is *now* was formed in part by the darkness of prison, the darkness of his failures— before he had even seen the daylight of success. There was no shortcut. He is who he is and where he is now because of those experiences.

So too for us, we are formed into holiness through our failures. These provide opportunities for growth. Indeed, there is no shortcut to holiness. However, it is precisely because we do know love, the love of God in Christ that never lets us go, that we need not fear failure, nor place our trust in the false securities of this world. For in Jesus, we are given light in the darkness, the Second Adam who goes before us, faces all that we shall face, and prepares a way.

Towards the end of the song, the lyrics return to the same dark refrain; smoke, dust, no love, but then there is a shift, as the song closes with the repeated words; turn, turn, turn.

This season of Lent reminds us we *are* dust, but not without love or hope, for we are dust beloved by God. As we turn again to the cross, we see our failure met by God's love. Here, in the wood of the cross, this tree of death becomes again the tree of life, where curse and death are finally defeated, and where God takes the dust of our lives, and remakes us into his new creation.

Amen.