

Dust

18 11 12

Heavenly Father,
whose blessed Son was revealed to destroy the works of the devil
and to make us the children of God and heirs of eternal life:
grant that we, having this hope,
may purify ourselves even as he is pure;
that when he shall appear in power and great glory
we may be made like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom;
where he is alive and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit
one God now and for ever.

Our text can be found in today's Old Testament reading from the Book of the prophet Daniel chapter 12 and verse 2:

**'Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake,
some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt.'**

November is a month for remembering. Last week, we remembered the fallen, those who have given their lives in the service of our country. A fortnight ago, we recalled the fundamental principle that underpins our faith as Christians: love of God – his for us and ours for him – and love of neighbour love informed by love of self. Today on the 3rd Sunday of the Kingdom Season, let us remember our great Christian hope: the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

The passage from which our text is drawn is one of the few in the Old Testament that point the belief in an after-life. My favourite is when Job says to his friends:

I know that my Redeemer lives

And that at the last he will stand upon the earth

And after my skin has been thus destroyed

Then in my flesh I shall see God Job 19 25 - 26

Even at his lowest point, when everything in Job's life seems grim, he is still able to affirm a belief in a living, loving God whom one day he will see in the flesh. And it is this confidence death is not the end that is mirrored in the final chapter of the book of Daniel.

Daniel is an heroic figure whose unshakeable belief in God exposes him to danger in the lion's den but whose faith is rewarded when miraculously the lions fail to live up to expectation by devouring him. At the end of his short book is our encouraging text – **Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake.** The prophet draws on two images: that of dust and sleep. In the second creation story in Genesis chapter 2 (verse 7) **the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life** so that **man became a living being.** Then in the very next chapter, when Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden, God pronounces this awful condemnation: '**for dust thou art and unto dust that shalt thou return**'. The image of being made from the dust of ground and of eventually returning to that dust is a powerful statement of the nature of our physical body, that it and us have a limited time-frame and like the flowers of the field, we all necessarily one day will wither and die then decay.

The image of sleep as death is a common phrase in the Old Testament: the first example of its use I can find is in Deuteronomy 31 v16 when God says to Moses at the end of a long life: **thou shalt sleep with thy fathers**. Here the Hebrew for sleep is 'skakah', literally to lie down, whereas in Daniel, the verb in Hebrew to sleep is 'yashen'. The image of death being but a deeper form of sleep allows us the possibility of waking up again and that is precisely the central image that John Donne uses in his famous C17 sonnet on death:

**'One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death thou shalt die.'**

While I was back in England in October, I preached at the funeral service of the mother of a friend who at the age of 95 had died at home in bed in the presence of her family. I used this valediction from one of Shakespeare's last plays, 'Cymbeline'

**'Fear no more the heat of the sun
Nor the furious Winter's rages.
Thou thy earthly task hast done,
Home have gone and ta'en thy wages.
Golden boys and girls all must,
Like chimney sweepers, come to dust'**

How very true but the joy of our at the heart of our Christian faith is that though we come from dust and must one day return to that dust, we shall, as Daniel prophesies, awake from that sleep in the dust to be remembered in the sight of God who loves us all more than we can know.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

18th November, 2012

H: Sermon 26 : Dust

