“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return”

Dust and glory and Ekballei.

Dust - Ash Wednesday brings us face to face with mortality. It’s something we usually avoid. I don’t know when you last walked along Llandudno pier – it is one of those places we cannot go at the moment. A couple of years ago we went on Shrove Tuesday, it was a lovely day. How often in February can you sit on top of the Great Orme, sheltered from the wind, and eat your butties?

We took it for granted of course. A drive along the North Wales coast, a walk along the promenade, then up the Orme. Never did we dream that one day such simple freedoms would be denied us.

It makes you think. Lent is a time to think. We are in a wilderness time. It is uncomfortable, it is hard, but remember that it is in the wilderness that God so often acts. It is in the wilderness that new beginnings happen.

The Great Orme is a marvellous spot, it must mean a lot to many people because if you walk out to the headland you will find several discrete piles of dust – people go there to scatter the ashes of their loved ones.

Actually, if you scatter ashes on top of the Orme they’ll all blow off and end up on the pier, so save yourself the climb and go to the pier in the first place.

Either side of the pier are rows and rows of benches, all but one bearing the name of someone held in memory. (The exception is a couple who bought a bench to celebrate their golden wedding.) Most of the names are not local people – they are visitors – people for whom Llandudno, the pier, the seaside, the windswept Orme, speaks of a better place.

Many of the plaques on the benches reflect the value of a better place – that where people are, their home, their work, the daily grind, they feel isn’t enough - there remains a longing for something above and beyond.

So it is to the seaside that people go to make that important gesture.

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. This dust is both reality and glory. Scientists tell us that the stuff we are made of was born in the furnace of a star. Stars are the building blocks of creation – it is in their heat and intense gravity that matter is formed. If we are dust, then we are star dust. Every atom in your body was formed somewhere beyond – the dust that swirled through space - over countless ages becoming rocks and planets and water and air – and life – created in the heart of a star.

Which is pretty amazing. I often reflect the words of Wesley in his hymn – Love divine all loves excelling – near the end

Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place. He didn’t know much about astrophysics, but he knew that it is the things of this world which reflect the glory that is to come – and are of themselves a glory to be rejoiced in. That’s important – the things of this world are where glory is to be found. Family, friendship, love, loyalty, compassion, glory is here, and it points to a glory yet to come.

So as you walk along the pier - every bench, every plaque, every memory, the celebration of a golden wedding – these speak of glory. And it is glory in the here and now.

The dust and the glory and ekballei.

Ekballei. We don’t come easily to the wilderness, to Lent. It is a tough journey and many choose not to acknowledge it. It is time to remind ourselves, again, year on year, of how Jesus comes to the wilderness. St Marks tells us that the Spirit ‘drove’ Jesus out into the wilderness. He uses the word ‘ekballei’ – it’s a forceful, powerful word. It’s where we get the word ballistic from – as in a ballistic missile.

The Spirit hurls Jesus into the wilderness – because this Lenten time isn’t a time of ease and comfort, we are disinclined to come easily, if it feels like a struggle then maybe you’re doing it right.

Dust and glory and ekballei. Over the next few weeks we will follow Christ in the wilderness. We need to make wilderness moments – and they don’t happen easily either. A moment to stop, pause, think, pray.

This year we cannot have Lent groups, but the Church of England has provided a good resource of daily prayer, reading and reflection. It is available free as an app, either for Android or iOS. Please use that resource, make a moment of wilderness every day. God makes new beginnings in the wilderness.

In my daily prayer I follow the Rule of Benedict. Benedict knew all about the dusty bits of life, the reality of living with ourselves and living with others. The reality of living in our world. The reality of living with God. And he knew it isn’t easy.

Benedict’s rule is at times down to earth, compassionate, realistic. And at other times it hurls – it makes demands that are uncomfortable – but important. He tackles head on the conflicting pressures of daily living. The joy of hospitality. Moments of solitude. Times of companionship. In the Rule we meet ourselves as we are, sometimes joyful, sometimes cross and grumpy, we recognise times when we fill emptiness with busyness, and what happens when we give too much of ourselves to the demands of others.

In wisdom we come home – the heart of Benedict’s wisdom is that we don’t need to look to the above and beyond, to the unreachable – to live well – in ourselves, with others and in God is not about being somewhere else and someone else. He brings us down to earth – to the reality around us, where God waits for us.

God waits in the wilderness. He needs us to stop and be still. He needs us to listen. He waits for us to empty ourselves of too many distractions. The wilderness is an opportunity, and like this hard and difficult time, in the emptiness we discover new possibilities.

There are no ashes this Lent. But we have dust and glory and Ekballei.