

ASH WEDNESDAY
Eucharist
St. Michael's Cornhill
Wednesday March 1st 2017
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In his powerful, jaunty but tragic poem A Toccata of Galuppi's, Robert Browning conjures up a picture of a corrupt, decadent and fairly mediaeval Venice. The last two stanzas capture the mood perfectly:

“As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop,
Here on earth they bare their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop,
What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?

‘Dust and ashes!’ So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold.
Dear dead women, with such hair too – what’s become of all the gold
Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old.”

The image of ashes as a sign of failure, of death and mortality remains as powerful now as it was in the times of ancient Judaism, recorded in Old Testament times – sackcloth and ashes which stands behind the title *Ash Wednesday*. Even this very city has been a symbol of this. My father escaped from a burning building on the corner of Fore Street and Moor Lane, in 1940, just before it collapsed. When I was a child the ashes still remained in what is now the Barbican.

So, today does with sharp and searing images remind us of the consequences, the impact of human fallenness, through individual sin and failure, or more widely through war and depredation. But that is not the sum of what the gospel teaches, for *gospel* itself means *good news*

The ashes imprinted on us today are the fruits of burning last years's palm crosses. Given out on Palm Sunday they were a sign of Christ's suffering and his triumph. For remember, Jesus entered Jerusalem as a king and after his resurrection he becomes the king of all things – his triumph transforms creation. So today we do make penance and in this season we do offer ourselves again to God, but knowing that even in our fallenness we are redeemed. Amen

Readings

Genesis 2. 15-17, 3. 1-7

Romans 5. 12-19

Matthew 4. 1-11