

King's College London Chapel



Sermon on Ash Wednesday by the Dean,
The Revd Dr Ellen Clark-King,
On Wednesday 2nd March 2022

In a few minutes I will invite you forward to receive a cross of ash on your forehead. Ash like that created by buildings being burnt by Russian fire in the Ukraine. Ash like that which clogs the throats of humans and animals alike in war zones and in forest fires. Ash to remind us that we will die. Ash to remind us of our own personal capacity for sinful destruction.

It is pointless to pretend that this is not a bleak Ash Wednesday. We are in the tail end of a pandemic, with human aggression and destruction yet again being played out in Europe, in a world whose deep fragility becomes clearer every year. It is an Ash Wednesday to cry out in lament and to wonder where humanity can find forgiveness, where the whole world can find hope.

Do you know what it's like when you're speaking your pain to someone – telling them about how hard a situation is or about what feels wrong in a relationship - and they immediately start to offer you solutions? You should try this or do that and then all will be well. When all you really want is to have someone hear and acknowledge your pain and be with you in the midst of it?

I feel Christianity is sometimes like that sort of advice-giving friend. Wanting to step away from the painful realities to the spiritual solutions, too scared of lament and too quick to escape into praise. Making us feel guilty if we are not comforted, not shiny, happy, positive people.

Today let us cry out our pain for the people of Ukraine. Let us feel our anger at the arrogance, violence and cruelty displayed by Putin. Let us feel our own sense of helplessness, our own fear for how the situation may grow even worse. Let us face and lament this hideous reality. Let us know what the ashes on our foreheads really mean.

Let us also know that this lament sounds from the mouth of God as well as our own voices – that it echoes in the divine realm even more loudly than it does on earth. That our violence, our arrogance, our loss, our pain breaks God's heart again and again and again.

But unlike our own hearts which may grow hardened with scar tissue from the blows life has dealt us, unlike this God's heart only breaks more open to us with each hammer blow of human pain. There is no divine compassion fatigue just a constant steady unstoppable flow of love outward to the world.

This Lent let us feel the weight of the ash on our forehead. Let us admit to ourselves what it means to be part of this fallen, finite, frightening world. Let us lament not just the pain and wrongness of the world but also the pain and wrongness of our own hearts. And let us do this knowing that through our voices echoes the divine cry of love and pain. Knowing that our brokenness is held within a love that never breaks. That deep inside the darkest night, the hardest Lent, there is the promise of a dawn when ash will be transfigured into the rich earth of renewal and life.

For what is impossible for us is possible for God. With God there is no death that does not offer the possibility of greater life, no violence that can overwhelm the promise of divine peace, no hatred that can defeat the power of love, and no ash that cannot become the bearer of light to a darkened world.

Amen.