



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

### **Ash Wednesday 2023**

***Remember O man that you are dust and unto dust you shall return***

Readings: *Joel 2: 12-18, Ps 50, 2 Corinthians 5: 20-6:2, Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-18*

On a frosty night, when the clouds have been driven from the sky and the whole arch of the heavens is displayed in all its glory like a box of an hundred thousand jewels sparkling on a cushion of black velvet, go out and stand on your kitchen doorstep with the light off and the moronic rumble of the television hushed and, for a few minutes, simply gaze, silent and humble, into the infinite bowl of space.

The distance to the nearest of those diamond lights is measured in light years – the distance light can travel in one year. That is nearly SIX MILLION MILLION MILES. The nearest star is almost five light years away (or thirty million million miles), the nearest galaxy 25 thousand light years or 150,000,000,000,000,000 miles. The light that we can see twinkling from the farthest star that we can see with the naked eye will have set out across space before Abraham was born, before the pyramids were built. Some of those stars no longer even exist. We see their light but they have long ago imploded and scattered their shattered dust across the neighbouring universe.

So, as we stand in contemplation of the immensity of space, lodged for the briefest moment of time on the floating miracle of this fragile Earth, our

island home.

We recall our place in the universe of universes and we are humbled. How small and apparently insignificant we are. Yet, out of all the infinite possibilities of the creation, God has chosen here and us to be the summit of His work, the final statement of His own image, written, not in the grandeur of the shimmering beauty of the Orion Nebula, or the distant majesty of Andromeda but here – and in the dust of dead stars. For that is what we are – the dust of dead stars that God has, late on in His creation, taken and formed and breathed into it His life. Every Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, the priest blesses the Ashes from the burnt palms of last year's Palm Sunday and marks the foreheads of the faithful with this sign. He says the words: *'Remember O man that you are dust and unto dust you shall return.'*

That we might remember our humble origins in the dust of the Cosmos. To contemplate our mortal fate to return one day, a short span hence, to that same dust. To celebrate the glorious gift of life that God has given us to spend in His service. And to know that our only hope beyond this dust and death and disintegration lies in the life that has animated this same dust, endured and defeated death and leads us onto eternity and glory – Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Saviour - our souls litten by Him and shining with a flame that can never be put out. The reconstitution of this frail dust into an eternal body fit for the Presence of the One who made us is the mystery of the Resurrection and why the future of our life depends on following Jesus.

On our foreheads today we will wear, in penitence and sorrow, the sooty mark of our sin – the sign of how our disobedience disfigures the image of God in us. But we will also wear it as a reminder that what God has done

once in time, that is given life to the dust of dead stars, He will do in eternity for all those who can be found in the Risen Body of Christ.

The journey of Lent, Holy Week and Easter is the pilgrimage from the dust of death and the ashes of hope to the glory of the new creation in Christ – the miracle of the Third Day.