

# Order and disorder



Sunday before Lent - 6 March 2011

Ash Wednesday - 9th March 2011



STARTING OUT

## Order turns to disorder in an imperfect world

As we prepare for Lent, we focus on Ash Wednesday. The first day in the penitential season of Lent, is so called because of a rite, celebrated in some churches, where ash is placed on the forehead of each person in the sign of the cross, with words such as 'remember that you are dust and to dust you will return' or a call to repent and turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The ash is traditionally made from the burned dried palm leaves from the previous Palm Sunday.

Ash Wednesday is therefore a day in the Christian calendar which reminds us that we have all failed to live up to God's desire and will for us. We are none of us perfect and have all fallen short. But we are always given a chance to start again.

If we dig deeper into the symbolism of the Ash Wednesday rite, we can also find that the liturgy offers us a profound truth about the world we live in. Nothing stays the same for ever. Everything living decays and dies. The green living leaves of the palm tree become ash; the dead bodies of people and animals rot and turn into dust. The origin of the text 'remember that you are dust' is Genesis 3.19 where God pronounces Adam and Eve's fate after their disobedience and as they enter into the imperfect fallen world. They are the first of what in this series we call the **Unreconciled** ones, people who are in some way cut off from what God intended them to be. God reminds Adam and Eve that they were made by him from the 'dust' of the created world, the same materials as make up our living planet, and that when we die we return to that dust. We are born, we live, we die.

*All people are grass,  
Their constancy is like the flower of the field.  
The grass withers, the flower fades*

**Isaiah 40: 6-8 (NRSV)**

This all sounds a bit miserable, but it is important that we face up to the fact of change and decay and death. First, because we live in a society that wants to pretend these things don't



exist. We are continually being told that we have to stay looking young, being active, and hiding illness, old age and death away. Secondly, by acknowledging that we live in a world in which order always breaks down to disorder and decay, we can discover that we can do something purposeful about it, and we can be certain that, as with Adam and Eve, God always accompanies us in our struggles and attempts to make sense of this world. God does not hide in Paradise leaving Adam and Eve to suffer and die alone. God is alongside all who are Unreconciled in the mess of human living. Finally, as Christians, the honest acknowledgement that all living things die and their bodies rot to dust, starts us on the journey to the extraordinary mystery of Easter, when Jesus really and truly died, was buried in a tomb and yet was raised from the dead.

## Activity

**With a group, you can prepare this item in advance by taking photographs for a discussion.**

- If you have a church in your area which has a memorial to a famous person go and have a look at their tomb, monument or window dedicated to them. See what you can find out about them. What did they do in life and why was the memorial created?
- Or: look at your local war memorial. What do you suppose happened to the people who are commemorated there? How can you find out about them?
- If your church has a graveyard take a walk around the graves looking at the names and dates. You might also visit your local municipal cemetery or garden of remembrance. What can you find out about the lives and deaths of the people there? Are some of them related to people in your community?
- Pick one of these people – the famous person, the war dead, or a local person and imagine what their lives might have been like. What did they look like? Who was in their family? What was their community like? What might they have eaten and drunk? What might they have hoped to do before they died?



GOING DEEPER

## Order turns to disorder

Scientists tell us that the way order turns to disorder is written into the laws of the universe. We wouldn't exist without it. The elements which build our living bodies were formed from the remains of stars which lived and died long ago. We were born because our ancestors lived long enough to have children before they died. We inherit our world as it is, because they learned to farm, to build communities, to create beauty to gladden the heart, to investigate the secrets of science, to make the world a better place. We add





order to the world by committing our energy and effort to it. The other side of this is that we must continually use energy to keep ourselves alive; we rely on the death of other living things to survive, whether they be lambs or lettuces. Beyond the balance of nature however, there is another capacity in human beings. We can use our gift of being alive to destroy where there is no need for destruction, to waste valuable resources, to damage our planet and to threaten through war and reckless consumption the lives of those who come after us. There is a desperate need for healing, mending, reconciling work. But reconciliation isn't just about mending stuff. It's also about using all our talents and resources to create something *new* out of the grief and mess.

That's why Ash Wednesday gives us an opportunity for a new start. We can reflect that we are on earth for this lifetime and what we decide to do with our lives matters. As people living in a fallen world, we are part of the Unreconciled. Does that mean life is hopeless and purposeless or is there something we can strive for? What are we going to do with our gifts, talents and energy? What does *God* want us to do?

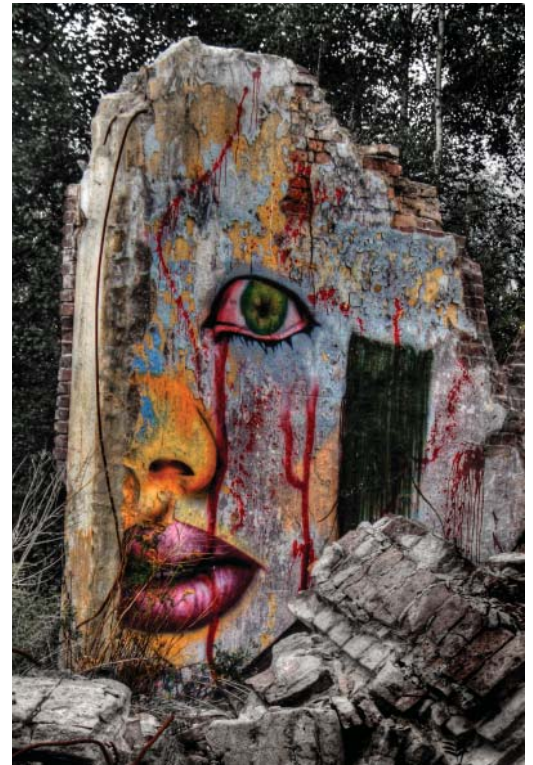


Photo: SnaPsi Сталкер 

## Activity

### Investigating order and disorder

Print off some pictures of famous people from the internet, each one to fill a sheet of A4 paper. Make 2 copies of each person's picture. Cut or tear one picture from each pair into 16 pieces and put each set of 16 bits in an envelope. Write the famous person's name on the envelope eg Brad Pitt. Ask people in pairs to reassemble the bits to make the image complete, using sellotape, glue, staples, etc. Pin up the original and the repaired versions side by side.



### Discuss together

- What does it take to mend something which is broken? Can anything ever be mended perfectly? Are there some things which are better after repair?
- What would you do about: a deep scratch on a polished table? A tear in a valuable coat? A broken window? A broken leg?
- Why would you want to, or bother, to repair these things?







MOVING ON

## Celebrating the Bible

In this year of celebrating 400 years of the King James Version of the Bible, passages are given from both the KJV and the NRSV. You can use which ever one you prefer.

### 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10

<sup>20</sup> Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.

<sup>21</sup> For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

#### 2 Corinthians 6

<sup>1</sup> We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.

<sup>2</sup> (For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.)

<sup>3</sup> Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed:

<sup>4</sup> But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses,

<sup>5</sup> In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings;

<sup>6</sup> By pureness, by knowledge, by long suffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned,

<sup>7</sup> By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left,

<sup>8</sup> By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true;

<sup>9</sup> As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed;

<sup>10</sup> As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.

(KJV)

<sup>20</sup> So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

<sup>21</sup> For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

#### 2 Corinthians 6

<sup>1</sup> As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.

<sup>2</sup> For he says,

'At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.'

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

<sup>3</sup> We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, <sup>4</sup> but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, <sup>5</sup> beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; <sup>6</sup> by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, <sup>7</sup> truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; <sup>8</sup> in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; <sup>9</sup> as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup> as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

(NRSV)





## Some questions for discussion

### KJV only

- Read the text through and make a note of any unusual words or phrases or things you didn't understand.

- Pick out any words or phrases you especially like or find meaningful.

Why do you like them?

- Choose a phrase from this passage and write it up or make a banner for your church to share with others as a signpost for the start of the Lenten journey.

### Any Bible version

- Who do you think are the Unreconciled ones St Paul has in mind? And what is their situation?
- What does St Paul tell us about being reconciled to God and deciding what to do with our lives?

- How far do we match up to the picture of godly living and endurance described by St Paul?

- Imagine you were one of the Christians at Corinth. What might your life be like? How would you feel when this letter was read to you?

CELEBRATING THE BIBLE

## Gospel

### Matthew 6:1-6, 16 -21

#### KJV

<sup>1</sup> Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.

<sup>2</sup> Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

<sup>3</sup> But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth:

<sup>4</sup> That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

<sup>5</sup> And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

<sup>6</sup> But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy

#### NRSV

### Concerning Almsgiving

<sup>1</sup> 'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

<sup>2</sup> 'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup> But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

### Concerning Prayer

<sup>5</sup> 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is



(KJV continued)

Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

<sup>16</sup> Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

<sup>17</sup> But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face;

<sup>18</sup> That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

<sup>19</sup> Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:

<sup>20</sup> But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:

<sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

(NRSV continued)

in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

### Concerning Fasting

<sup>16</sup> 'And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

### Concerning Treasures

<sup>19</sup> 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup> but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

### Some thoughts on 'order and disorder' in this passage

Jesus was constantly challenging the 'normal' order of things, because all too often what seemed to be the usual way of doing things had become a distorted and disordered version of what relationship with God was supposed to be about. In these two passages from Matthew chapter 6 it is 'alms giving' – publicly made charitable gifts which were a religious duty, and 'fasting' – voluntarily renouncing food, and perhaps sleep, to indicate devotion to God and repentance on behalf of the nation.

Both acts were intended to hasten God's intervention to 'save his people'. But in Jesus' time both acts had become very public demonstrations of piety – look at me and see how holy I am. Jesus disturbs this ordered form of the religious life, showing that it has become disordered in God's eyes. In effect he says that if we behave, even generously and with religious discipline, in order to gain credit for ourselves we nullify the value.

Jesus reveals how easily we can mess things up because of the self-centredness which lurks in the heart of even our best actions. He calls us to true repentance – putting God and his honour at the heart of all our intentions and everything we do. On Ash Wednesday, we get the chance to think about how our own spiritual lives have gone astray from what God really wants of us. And we get the chance to repent, to put things right, to start again.





### For discussion (using any version)

- How do you think you might have felt if you gave alms generously and fasted weekly, when you heard Jesus' challenging words about prayer and fasting?
- The word 'hypocrite' goes back to people playing a part in Greek drama, often wearing masks. Who do you think Jesus might 'unmask' today – politicians, public figures? In what circumstances have you felt, or might you feel, the need to wear a mask over your faith?
- If Jesus was teaching in your church today, what might he point out as having drifted away from what God really wants? How can we let him disturb our sense of what's ok and bring it more into line with his kingdom?

### MOVING INTO LENT

## Following Jesus

When Jesus went into the desert, he had to decide what he was going to do with his life. Like any one of us, he had to decide why he had been born as a human being on earth and what that human life was going to offer to all those around him. Above all, he had to be clear about the Father's will for his human life despite all the temptations of the world around him. We are told in the gospels that those temptations were very real and very powerful. Why bother to call other people to respond to God's will and turn back to the Father? Why trouble about other people's pain and misery and all their messy, broken lives, as long as you can have whatever you want?

We can see that Jesus' decision was to reject the temptations of wealth and power and to offer his whole self to God's reconciling work among human beings. He saw around him many groups of Unreconciled people who did not know God, or who were unable to flourish because of their circumstances.

Luke 4 16-20 tells us that Jesus announced his intention about his ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth, his home town. He reads the passage from Isaiah about God's intention for human beings, that those who are Unreconciled should be liberated from their state: captives should be set free; the blind should receive sight; the oppressed should be liberated. Jesus announces that he has come to achieve those things for God, to dedicate himself to fighting disorder and breakdown in human lives.



Jesus' message of hope and liberation didn't go down very well...







## Activity

- Ask your priest or minister to talk a little bit about why they entered ministry. When and how did they realise God was calling them to serve?
- Discuss in pairs what kind of decisions you had to make about the course of your life. How did you make the decisions? What sacrifices did you have to make? What ambitions do you have and what do you hope to have achieved in your lifetime? What do you think God might be calling you to do right now?

### MOVING OUT

## Action in the community

Reflect on where in your community there is disorder, mess or pointless waste. Identify one thing (such as a litter-picking day) where you could make a difference by spending time clearing up or reducing the waste and commit to doing it as a project as part of a Lenten promise. You could gather this up in the decision about what you can change (see below).



### RESTING ON THE WAY

## Theological reflection and prayer

Spend some time thinking and reflecting about mess and disorder in our lives, in the Church, in the community and in the world. This could be part of a prayer time, lifting up particular issues to God in repentance, acknowledging our part in creating disorder and asking for forgiveness.

You might like to look at the stories offered in the introductory chapter in our book *Unreconciled?* or you could also look at: David Ford *The Shape of Living: spiritual reflections for everyday life, Fount, 2002*; Nicholas Wolterstorff (1987) *Lament for a Son*, (Eerdmans, 1987); and Sheila Cassidy, *Light from the Dark Valley: Reflections on Suffering and the Care of the Dying*, (Ave Maria Press 1994)

It takes energy and effort to restore order and re-create God's vision for our world.







## Prayer

Lord,  
 We have torn your world apart;  
 it bleeds and reeks  
 with our restless lives.  
 Yet you remain patient,  
 stitching the fabric of the universe  
 into seamless beauty.  
 Teach us how to mend and make new;  
 teach us how to sew the tapestry  
 of your wonderful deeds. Amen



Photo: NASA/JPL-Caltech/UCLA

## DECISION TIME

# What is going to change?

Now gather up your thoughts and ideas, and with these things in mind, consider these questions:

- **Where is the seed of new life?** What gifts has God given us to counteract mess, waste and disorder in our situation?
- **How will we carry it?** What resources will we need to make a difference in our situation?
- **Where can it be born?** Identify one reconciling action we can commit to which will reduce or combat human disorder, waste and mess.
- **How can we nurture it?** How can we support that reconciling action and make sure it follows through?
- **What will we hope to see?** What will be changed at the end of the process and what difference should it have made?

## Going further

This resource is based on the Introduction in the book *Unreconciled?* where you can find lots of information, stories, and further ideas you can use for personal study or in a group, including more ideas for activities.

You could also look at books and resources on specific issues such as climate change and our part in it, such as Dave Bookless, *Planetwise: Dare to Care for God's World*, IVP 2008; James Jones, *Jesus and the Earth*, SPCK 2003 and C S Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, (Orbis 1986); and the Creation Time resources on the CTBI website.

The Daily Service on Radio 4 from March 7-10 offers more readings and reflections for you to listen to on the theme of order and disorder.

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Photo of *The Unreconciled* (The Cross and broken glass): CTBI / Vicki & Chuck Rogers / Phil Dragash 