**Ash Wednesday 17 February 2021**

**(Joel 2:1-2,12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)**

I wonder whether you saw David Attenborough’s recent series, ‘A Perfect Planet’? The sheer quality of the photography was a timely and worthy reminder that our physical world is literally a wonderful place, a place of beauty. As the Covid-19 pandemic continues, we need that counterpoint.

Another reminder of the physical nature of our planet, and therefore of ourselves, will come later in this service. We will hear the words: ‘Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return’. But the words which are then said suggest that our *true* nature is the *perfected* – redeemed – form of our physical nature. Those words are, ‘Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.’

Today, Ash Wednesday, we begin our journey through Lent – a journey towards our yearly remembrance of the Passion of Christ; that is, his ‘redemptive suffering’. He died to take away our sins. To mark the beginning of this journey we may not be able to receive a physical Imposition of Ashes this year, but in many ways a virtual reminder of our physical nature may help us to consider afresh our true nature. And likewise, it may help us see anew the true place in our lives of Christ Jesus: the one who says to us, ‘where your treasure is, there your heart will be also’.

So first, a little more on our true nature. As ‘the science’ *guides* and informs us, there can be no doubt that we are ‘dust’: we are made up of physical matter, and our physical selves will indeed return to dust. But of course our lives have more than merely a physical dimension, and it seems to me that the enduring work of David Attenborough’s illustrious forebear Charles Darwen – namely, his theory on the origin of the species – does not even begin to explain how the human quality of free-will came about.

What Darwen and his successors would say is that the free will of human beings, if it is to be truly free, needs to be the product of a free universe. In other words, the universe itself must have a kind of free will.

It follows that if the evolution of the universe is free, subject to the fundamental laws of physics, then this introduces the potential for bad developments as well as good ones. And in the world around us, an obvious example of a bad development is a virus giving rise to a global pandemic. (And for good measure, that bad virus would have the capacity to mutate and thereby maintain its unhealthy work).

Our view of creation therefore needs to make allowance for the creator investing potential in his creatures, rather than simply creating the finished article. Yes, with the eye of faith, we can see the work of a creator in a natural order in which it seems that overall a descent into chaos is kept at bay. But for us to be convinced beyond reasonable doubt that the natural order – so clearly ‘red in tooth and claw’ – was created by a loving God we need something else.

That is where the true place of Christ Jesus in our lives comes in. At the Imposition of Ashes we hear the words: ‘turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ’. Sin is often defined as being the result of our exercising our free will to reject God’s will for us. And yet, by definition, the will of a loving God must be what is best for us. Another, alternative, definition of sin is this. If love is absent from anywhere then we must suppose that God would be absent from there, too. The only place in which we cannot find God is in sin – where it is not that God has made himself absent, but that the sinner has chosen to withdraw from the presence of the divine, from the reality of love…

But each time *we* withdraw from the reality of love we need only think of the parable of the Prodigal Son. In that parable, Jesus teaches us that all we need to do is turn back to our loving Father and we will find him already coming to meet us and to welcome us home! As psalm 51 reminds us, ‘The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise’.

When we stand before the fullness of the reality of God’s love for us, we see how far our own love for him falls short. We are faced with a choice: to enter in to the embrace of his love, or to turn away in shame.

So rather than turn away in shame, let us ‘turn away from sin’ – in other words, repent. True repentance is not motivated by fear – perhaps of being found out, by other people or by God and then punished. No, true repentance is motivated by love. We seek to align our behaviour and our attitudes with what is expected of us by the One who loves us more than we can know.

We are here on this ‘perfect planet’ for but a short span. It seems to me that the primary purpose of our lives is to encounter and to respond to the love of God. We can and do experience that love in the beauty and order of the physical world – creation – but more fundamentally we experience it in relationship with Jesus Christ. And yet, the selfless love of God, revealed to us in Christ, is something we can choose simply not to see. As has been said, ‘it may be as big as a mountain, but we can still miss it’!

Once we have encountered that love our lives are transformed: our only desire then is to ‘turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ’.

May ‘the Lord [indeed] enrich us with his grace, nourish us with his blessing, defend us in trouble and keep us from all evil’.

Amen