

Someone in the parish was talking with me yesterday reflecting on the complexity of my role as rector. In any one week you can move from all kinds of emotions. Last night I sat with one of our new families who on Sunday we will celebrate the baptism of their daughter this Sunday coming, late last night I sat in our home group and sat studying God's word together, and then on the same day, yesterday morning I sat with a gentleman who no longer could speak or eat, his body was in shut down and I sat with him reading scripture declaring the promises of God's love to him. It reminded me of that passage in Psalm 139 'Lord you have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways'.

Every aspect of life the Lord knows. And so again the familiar words of Psalm 121 come to mind also 'The Lord will keep you from all harm— he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore'.

I suppose in recent years I have been more aware than anything of the frailty of life, as I have watched many many people pass away from this world into the next.

Whilst not wanting to make this too mournful a reflection, in the Funeral Service of the Church of Ireland, these words are prayed as part of our Intercessions. 'Give faith and comfort, O Lord, to all who are bereaved. Strengthen them to meet the days to come with steadfastness and patience, not sorrowing as those without hope, but in thankful remembrance of your mercy in the past, and waiting for a joyful reunion in heaven in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen'. 'Nor sorrowing as those without hope'.

And yet very often I am faced with situations where people sit in hopelessness. They cannot see the hope that I talk about. They have no sense of hope. In fact it doesn't even have to be a funeral – it can be in many aspects of life – when worry, sickness, unexpected sad news occurs that there is a loss of hope.

The people of God have a different story, no matter what circumstance they face. Each person who can declare they Christ at the centre of their lives has a promise of hope to live for. With hope, our expectation isn't tethered to thin air. It's grounded to promise.

Today we have officially entered today into this period of Lent. It's a reflective season. And during Lent, we take a closer look at ourselves, for our need to be renewed and re-engaged with our mortality. And so Lent should help us realign our lives to walk more closely with God.

Today begins that season with Ash Wednesday. It is connected with confession. We confess that we have gone astray. We confess that we've erred, against God and against one another. And most significantly, we confess that we are finite. Our lives will come to an end. And for many today around the world, not just Roman Catholics, but many Church of Ireland parishes including Belfast Cathedral will provide the imposition of ashes on people's foreheads or hands, and the following words will be said, "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." I can remember as a child my dad arriving home into the evening of Ash Wednesday, maybe a little worse for wear as a result of one too many drinks, and on his head was that symbol of ash.

What is ash? Ash is what remains when something is burned. They are the remains of something that has been utterly destroyed. What they once were is completely gone.

And yet today let's think about that hope which I spoke about. There is hope among those ashes. And the words of Psalm 51 reflect that hope.

The words lay bare just how completely we've fallen short of God's high calling for our lives. But the psalmist lays his hope on something very significant. He asks to be regarded – not according to the measure of his sinfulness. He prays, regard me verse 1 “according to your unfailing love!”

He doesn't ask to be judged on his own fallen character. He appeals to God's character. He calls upon God's abundant mercies. Let's face it folks, if any of us were to be judged entirely on our fallen character then ashes is probably all that we should expect. And yet we know that the hope we declare is because of God's unfailing love for us. We do not need to sit and wallow in our shame and despair. Instead in the hope of God's abundant love, we confess our sins.

Ashes may represent something that's been utterly destroyed. But we know that Jesus emerged from the ashes. Our Lord Jesus Christ has been to the cross; he's been laid in the tomb; But in his resurrection, Jesus has shown us exactly how abundant God's mercies are. No stone rolled in front of his grave could stop that love from reaching us. Remember what Paul said to the Romans in Chapter 8 – Let me read to you from the New Living Translation “38 And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. 39 No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

So today begins Lent, a period of reflection. But remember that the hope of Easter tells us how Lent will end. It tells us what comes next. And in the promise of Easter, hope lives even through the ashes. Whatever you feel about yourself today, whatever you may be facing or have faced in this past year since the last Lent, know God's love will always be with you – and it comes through the knowledge and hope of the resurrection of Jesus who was able to take all our shame, all our guilt, all our fear, all our pain, and give us the hope that allows us to lift our heads and know that he has conquered it, he has saved us so that we do not wander around with a hopeless end, but rather an endless hope.