



Ash Wednesday 2010

On September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 I had a phone call from my church secretary. I remember it was a beautiful sunny day, a Monday. We were still lounging around – it was a day off – we were still in our housecoats having coffee – and she told me “Go and turn on your TV to CNN because there’s some pretty terrible things happening right now in New York City that you need to know about.

We spent the rest of the day as the news came in about the collapse of the Twin Towers and how we realized that the world had changed and I remember saying “It’s never going to be the same again”.

One of the things that I remember is the pictures of how the streets poured down ashes and how the people were caked in dust and the grime and how they looked like ghosts.

Later on I remember being startled that not very far from all of this just off Wall Street the Archbishop of Canterbury was there meeting with church leaders.

The room they were in started filling with smoke and soot and the Trinity Auditorium was soon thick with it – and they couldn’t get out of the room and the doors were jammed and they didn’t know what was going on or what had happened and one of the priests realized that there was every likelihood that they were going to suffocate.

The Police broke through the back door of the room and helped them out just before the second tower came down. The ashes were thick in the streets like a blizzard. Countless dump truck loads of them were carted away from Ground Zero. One church that was near the site, St. Patrick’s, couldn’t use their front doors for some time because of the pile of ashes.

One of the things I thought often about was the reaction of the West to September 11<sup>th</sup> . How did we respond to this? How





did we reflect upon the ashes of the World Trade Center? The answer is that we didn't think. We became very reactionary we increased security and train stations and at airports and a homeland defense plan was put in place – but we didn't for one moment sit among the ashes and think that just possible the West is hated by much of the world for the lifestyle that we live and that perhaps rather than the Western nations eating up the world we might be wiser to repent of the way we live.

Ashes could have been an opportunity for repentance. Well today our focus is on ashes and personally, I've never like Ash Wednesday much. This is not my favourite day of the year and certainly not a favourite day to preach on. Ashes remind me of things that are gone and cannot ever be brought back no matter how much I wish they could be. Things that are destroyed and cannot be put back together again. In some ways I fear them.

You know, I think that everyone has times in their lives when all we see are ashes. When things fall apart sometimes through our own poor choices and sometimes not but we have had moments when it all collapses on us all falls down and we feel covered head to foot with ash from the rubble that we're in.

And there are many ways this happens - marriage breakdowns, career failures, financial ruin sickness and death – all of these things that destroy the lives we have built that turn our hopes into ashes. Perhaps we fear them because we can't possibly imagine anything beyond the rubble that we feel we're in.

But perhaps what we *fear most* is that they take our illusion away that somehow we are in control of our lives and that we have things under control. This was very evident on 911. You see, something else that also came down on 911 was the national illusion that we are in control. New York City, a symbol of American power, of industry of status of wealth and might was shown to be very vulnerable and I think that struck a chord in all of us because we tend to think that way too.





We have our personal illusions. We think that through power and technology and good investments and in getting the right job knowing the right people having the right spin that we too are the masters of our own fortune – and when misfortune happens we realize how quickly that façade crumbles and how great an illusion it is.

Perhaps Ash Wednesday is a chance for us to take time to think about the fact that the only security we really have is in our faith and trust in God – to be with us even in rubble.

Ash Wednesday is an opportunity for us to repent of the illusion we have that we are our own masters that we can be self-reliant – which is a form of idolatry – and turn once again to place our full trust and reliance in Christ in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17.28).

It is hard to sit with ashes. It is hard to give up the illusion that we are the ones really in control and it is hard to be in the ashes and to believe that God still cares for us. God is there even in the midst of the ashes as the only one we can rely on.

Sometimes we need others to see God for us when we cannot see him for the dust trusting that in time, when the ashes are swept aside we will see him too.

There are many heroic stories that came out of 911. There is one that didn't get a lot of press and it is about Archbishop Rowan Williams – as the auditorium filled with soot and smoke and there was nothing they could do and it looked like the end was near – something beautiful happened - the Archbishop prayed and comforted those who were with him.

This story gives me hope when things fall apart – for there, in the midst of the ashes where you would least expect it to be was a sign of the presence of God.

Amen.

