



In Genesis, in the opening verses of Holy Scripture, the Bible tells us that God fashioned human beings out of the dust of the earth; and then, sharing his Holy Spirit, breathed life into each of us.

The Hebrew word for 'human' – pronounced, '*ath-AM*;' or '*AD-am*' as we say in English – is based on the Hebrew for red. Some biblical scholars and linguists think this linking is an intentional illusion to red clay. And indeed, red clay is so prevalent in the areas of Palestine and Israel that the stuff doesn't just get on your shoes, and soil your clothes, and stain your carpets – spend enough time there, and you find that it actually enters your pores and becomes a very part of you.

Now, some people think this image of God forming the first human - the first 'adam' – out of clay is merely a poetic image. But science has demonstrated how accurate it actually may be. We all know that the make-up of the human body is mostly water. Remove that water, and we are left with just a pile of chemicals. And this dry pile of chemicals, because of its high iron content, contains a reddish hue – much like the clay in our yards. We are, then, in our basic humanity, not that much different from the clay beneath our feet.

But there is more to this dust and ashes analogy than just our chemical composition. The fact that we are merely over-glorified clay has a spiritual significance, for it reminds us of our complete and utter dependence upon God. Once again, the Hebrew language emphasizes this fact; for the same word - '*RU-ach*' – is used for both the breath of God and the Spirit of God. And without this divine '*ruach*,' without God's breath, without God's sharing of his Holy Spirit, we are nothing more than clay and chemicals, nothing more than dust and ashes.

The problem is that we forget this fact – forget that we are merely ashes and dust – forget that we are less kith and kin to one another than to the common clay beneath our feet. We wipe the dust off our shoes, wash it from our clothes, and sweep it out of our homes – and convince ourselves that we are so much more than we actually are. We deny our dependence upon God. We delude ourselves into thinking we are the masters of our destiny and the authors of our own lives.

And this is exactly why we need this day. We need to repent of our pride. This is why the prophet Joel calls us to repentance. This is what Ash Wednesday is all about. This day, this season of Lent, is about remembering what we really are.

And what are we? We are dust and ashes, made alive only by the gracious gift of God's Holy Spirit. We are arrogant and sinful little creatures who fail to give God the credit. We are disobedient children in need of our Father's help.

And so, we come this day, to acknowledge our dependence, and repent of our sinful ways.

But be warned. This act of repentance is not merely for outward show. God wants us to rend not just our clothing, but to tear open our very hearts. Our worship this day is not to be an outward show of piety, but an inward turning from evil, and a tearing away from all that separates us from the love of God.

Jesus warns his disciples not to make a false show of their piety. Don't make a show of our prayers. Don't blow a trumpet to call other's attention to your charity. When you fast, don't make it known to everyone, or their fleeting admiration will be all you get from it. Instead, hide these acts; make them secret, a pact between you and your God alone. That way, the only benefit you get from your pious obedience is the inner satisfaction of doing God's will and the blessing that comes with it.

In a moment I will invite you to trace the sign of the cross on your forehead. Do it slowly, deliberately. Feel you thumb or fingers tracing each arm of the cross across you skin. And remember . . . remember that on the day of your baptism, all those years ago, your hair still wet with the water from the font, that very same action was done for you by the priest as he pronounced that you were, from that day on, "sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever."

Don't let this holy act be only an outward, physical symbol with no inner, spiritual significance. Rend your heart, tear open your heart . . . and take to heart the significance of your need for and dependence upon the goodness of God alone.