

From dust to Easter dawn

Worship resources for Ash Wednesday



Rodney Aist

wild goose
publications



www.ionabooks.com

I. Responsive reading

Leader: Ash and rubble.

People: A lot of ash and rubble.

Leader: Sin, limitations and broken dreams ...

People: ... fill our lives, fill our streets, fill the world.

Leader: From ashes to ashes and dust to dust, life ends as it begins.

People: We can never escape the ash because the ash is us; the dust is ours.

Leader: Yet, ash, as dying life, becomes the soil of resurrection.

People: And in a world full of ashes, God imposes good news.

Leader: From the crossroads of human despair,

God invites us on a journey that transcends the dust.

People: From ashes to stars, from dust to Easter dawn.

Leader: Resurrection is rooted in what went wrong ...

People: ... and grows, through grace, into something gone right.

All: Amen

II. An Ash Wednesday reflection: A mount of ashes in Milan

Lent begins with ash and rubble and ends with a crucified body, sealed in a tomb, while pre-dawn darkness hovers over chaos and confusion. The pathway from Ash Wednesday to the threshold of resurrection is full of ash and rubble, which literally fill the streets in which we live.

I live on the corner of Monte Ceneri and Monte Generoso in Milan, Italy. The vast majority of Milanese streets are named after people, and I sense, as I

walk, a city inhabited by the memory, legacy and shadows of the dead. Streets occasionally take the names of places instead of people – and here, in urban Milan, I live at an intersection named after two Swiss mountains.

We inhabit a world that is named after names, and I live, to be precise, on the corner of Mount Ashes (Ceneri) and Mount Generosity (Generoso), which, taken together, denotes heaps and heaps of cinders, embers and ruins – a generosity of ashes, suggesting wasteland, destruction and desolation, atrocities and the worst images of human evil. I have yet to ascertain how Monte Ceneri, the mountain, got its name, and possibilities incite my imagination. Here, in the streets, at the intersection of place name and parable, there's no indication that people are aware of what the crossing means. Yet, their movements – much like our own – betray a search for meaning in a world layered with debris.

What I glimpse from my window – and enter whenever I go out – is human life in all its colour, in several shades of grey. Pedestrians, shoppers, loiterers and joggers. People coming and going, standing and waiting. Below multi-storied flats, there are bakeries, takeaways and phone shops. The post office queue extends down the street; there's always a crowd at the bus stop. Smells of pizza, dry cleaning and urine – not necessarily human – scent the air.

It's a paradox of place that the flattest of urban spaces can be named after mountains. Even so, Monte Ceneri takes urban horizons to a higher level: perched above the middle of the street for several hundred metres is an elevated viaduct shadowing life below. Up on the overpass, autos speed by, lorries roar and rumble and ambulances blare at regular intervals, spewing fumes and exhaust, spreading warnings and reminders. Life on Monte Ceneri is open, exposed and vulnerable; bifurcated, isolated and ignored. Ash settles on the ground.

While the corner of Monte Ceneri and Monte Generoso is completely flat, I'm a short walk away from Monte Stella (Mount Star), one of the higher points in the city. Atop its summit, one can see the Alps and glimpse the cathedral spires of Milan. Full of trees and verdant pathways, the park at Monte Stella is an urban interruption, a recreational paradise amidst the tarmac of Milan.

Monte Stella is no ordinary hill, beginning with the fact that it's named after the architect's wife, which betrays its life as an artificial mountain. Formed from the rubble of World War II, Monte Stella shines as a miracle of regeneration, a phoenix rising from its ashes, and its name – the Star Mountain – captures its celestial reach. With roots sunk into the soil of destruction, the trees of Monte Stella extend high into the sky, exuding life and beauty, offering shelter and protection, manifesting hope and resurrection.

If Ash Wednesday allows us to look ahead, it's a reminder that the cross is not discarded once the tomb is opened on Easter. Not as a fixation upon sin and death but precisely because its cinders are transformed into the soil of new life. Resurrection is rooted in rubble, and ash is a seed that, in its germination, conjoins heaven and earth.

While the bulk of my time is spent on Monte Ceneri, on the street of ashes, in the dust of everyday life, I'm grateful that Monte Stella is my neighbourhood park, amazed, as I walk, how God transforms the ruins of life. Reconciliation is rooted in what went wrong, and grows, through grace, into something gone right.

Of all Christian holy days, Ash Wednesday, which we mark with the imposition of ashes, is strangely the most familiar. To impose means 'to put or to place' but has further connotations of coming from an external source, as if what's being imposed is strange or foreign. While the imposition of ashes involves an external marking, the ashes themselves are too familiar to actually

be imposed. The ashes we use include the combustion of our uniquely failed dreams, the embers of dashed hope, the exaltations of Palm Sundays gone wrong. The dust is composed of our ruined relationships, the debris of good intentions, the residue of our mistakes and failures. 'From ashes to ashes and dust to dust.' The words do not refer to some universal concept of inanimate matter nor is the dust from an outside source.

No, the ashes are us. The dust is the actualities of our lives. Our physical bodies. Our passions, limitations, mistakes and memories. Our families and friends. Our streets and neighbourhoods. The world in which we live. Our embodied journeys in time and place.

From ashes to ashes and dust to dust. The ash is specific, particular and familiar. It's messy, yet we know it – but what we may not know without the experience of an Easter sunrise on Monte Stella is that the dust of our lives is the soil of resurrection.

It's God who ultimately imposes, using the ash of our lives as the seed of new life. Lent is God's invitation to follow Jesus on a sacred journey from Monte Ceneri to Monte Stella, from everyday ashes to the starred summit of resurrection surprise. The mystery of Ash Wednesday is the strangely warm feeling that 'ashes to ashes' excites within us. Imbued with divine presence, the words are humbling, familiar, yet deeply comforting. As God's imposes good news upon us, we hear 'dust to dust' as a divine promise of God's pre-resurrection, providential care, and experience again for the first time the shadowed beginnings of the gospel story.

III. An Ash Wednesday prayer

God of chaos and cosmos, detritus and delight, we turn to you in a dirty and difficult moment, as life is confused and uncertain, fragile and disorienting. Life feels grounded (too grounded) but rootless, seeded but trampled, layered with soot. Instead of stretching towards the heavens, we feel buried, stuck and immobile. We began with lofty aspirations; now our eyes are on the ground. We are creatures of the soil on a sojourn of hibernation. Dust collects; waste accumulates, and residue remains. Ash inhabits our hearts.

The grit and grime of everyday life is exhausting, debilitating, and we seek cleansing, simplicity and purification. We long for newness, freshness, goodness and beauty. We long to begin again. Instead, you mark us with muck and tell us to wait. Our sanctuary is between a rock and a hard place. You whisper in our ear: 'Persevere.'

As you invite us on this Lenten journey, one of time as much as movement, the good news concerns method as much as meaning. You are not starting over with us, but using who we are, what we are, and where we are – dust, soot, ash and seed – on a journey of transformation. Things, to be sure, will remain sullied for a while. Instead of pristine vestments, the journey features sackcloth and will be stained with blood, sweat and tears. Yet, the miracle of Lent is the miracle of life: you take what is – as it is – and make it whole. You take us, as we are, and make us holy. The roots of resurrection are grounded in the ashes of today. And if Peter was with us, he'd declare on our behalf: 'Gracious God, do not mark only our heads with ash, but our hands and feet as well.' Ashes are prelude to the gospel journey, and that's good news!

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Rodney Aist

About the author

Rodney Aist is a Methodist minister, pilgrimage author, and Holy Land scholar, who lives in Milan, Italy with his wife, Janet. He directs a doctor of ministry programme in pilgrimage and spirituality through Drew Theological School in New Jersey.

From dust to Easter dawn

by Rodney Aist

PL10646

ISBN 978-1-84952-768-2

Published 2021:

Wild Goose Publications

21 Carlton Court, Glasgow, G5 9JP, UK,
the publishing division of the Iona Community.

Scottish Charity No. SC003794.

Limited Company Reg. No. SC096243

www.ionabooks.com

Copyright © Rodney Aist

Cover image: Parco di Monte Stella, Milan, Italy © Rodney Aist

All rights reserved. Apart from reasonable personal use on the purchaser's own system and related devices, no part of this document or file(s) may be reproduced or transmitted in any form, by any means, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Non-commercial use:

The material in this document may be used *non-commercially* for worship and group work without written permission from the publisher.

Please make full acknowledgement of the source and where appropriate report usage to the CLA or other copyright organisation.

Commercial or online use:

For any *commercial or online* use of this material, permission in writing must be obtained in advance from Wild Goose Publications via PLSclear.com.

Rodney Aist has asserted his right in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work.

Wild Goose Publications, the publishing house of the Iona Community established in the Celtic Christian tradition of Saint Columba, produces books, e-books, CDs and digital downloads on:

- holistic spirituality
- social justice
- political and peace issues
- healing
- innovative approaches to worship
- song in worship, including the work of the Wild Goose Resource Group
- material for meditation and reflection

For more information:

Wild Goose Publications
The Iona Community
21 Carlton Court, Glasgow, G5 9JP, UK

Tel. +44 (0)141 429 7281
e-mail: admin@ionabooks.com

or visit our website at
www.ionabooks.com
for details of all our products and online sales