

Daniel's Reflection for Week Beginning 13th March – Gold in the Dust

I remember it like yesterday. My first temptation. It happened halfway through Lent in the year of my first Holy Communion. 'Mammy, Mammy,' I wailed, 'I've committed a sin.' I was clutching an old cake tin full of all the humbugs, jelly babies and pear drops that I had given up for Lent. It was a bizarre bargain. I would give them up for God if I could still save them up for an Easter Sunday orgy! By now the bull's eyes, the dolly mixtures, the pieces of Killarney sticks of rock were all a horrible sticky mess because I took the tin everywhere with me just to be sure, and kept opening it to smell, stare and touch in a most pathetic manner. After my confession no words of blame came from my mother's lips. They never did. 'Being good is hard, Dan,' she said, 'and it takes a long time to be good.'

It was probably her gentle way of saying, 'Remember, little man, you are only dust.' There isn't much you can do about dust to change its image. It is the graphic symbol of nothingness, of powerlessness, of anonymous insignificance. . . There is no escape from the human condition. Yet that is the condition which God cannot resist. It is the very condition in which God chose to be revealed. We get to heaven, then, not by avoiding or denying the dust around us and within us but by completely entering into that darkened state. It is in our dust that we are saved. 'The Word became dust.' This is another way of asserting, our scripture scholars assure us, that 'The Word became flesh' . . .

On Ash Wednesday the priest traced a cross of ashes on us and told us again that we are dust. If we only knew, these are the best words we will ever hear. They remind us, because we are sisters and brothers of the incarnate Lord, who became dust for us, that in our nothingness, too, we are filled with eternity, in our futility, we are redeemed, and in our sin-strewn lives we are showered with hidden graces of true glory.

To say this is easy. To suffer it is hard. Karl Rahner is so accurate in describing the boredom of everyday routine, the disappointments that we experience in everything – in ourselves, in our neighbours, in the church. We lose heart, he said, 'in the anxiety of our days, in the futility of our work, in the brutal harshness of our splintered world,' and in the wretched tins of humbugs we cannot resist. Again and again, we shall lie in the dust of our failures, humiliated and wanting to cry.

And yet, and yet, on each Ash Wednesday, our church faithfully reminds us that we are walking sacraments of Christian paradox. Outwardly we carry the grey cross of nothingness on our foreheads; inwardly our hearts believe that everything is already ours. Outwardly we weep and bleed as we stumble up the grimy Calvary of our lives; inwardly our dust is already shining with Easter gold.

(Unmasking God pp 21-23)