

1. Ash



The hearth in the cold of the morning? A crematorium? Pompeii? Ash is obviously connected with the endings of things. But talk to a gardener and you'll discover that ash has fertilising properties too and, in the context of COVID-19, the World Health Organisation is recommending that ash be used for hand-cleaning in parts of the world where soap and water are simply not available. Ash, then, also has life-giving, life-saving properties. It is a complex, multi-layered symbol.

There'll be few gatherings this Ash Wednesday for the tracing of ash crosses on foreheads, but we can still remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return (Gen 3:19). Yes, as the last year has done so savagely, these sombre words underline our frailty and mortality - but they do much more than that. As well as bringing us back to earth, they also make us want to reach for the skies. For when we recall that into our 'dust', God 'breathed the breath of life' (Gen 2.7), we see afresh that as well as being precarious, our lives are precious; as well as being destined for death, God's dream for us is life in all its fullness.

The Benedictine nun, Macrina Wiederkehr, puts it like this: "When you welcome death as one of the necessary breaths to be drawn, it changes before your very eyes into life."

Today...

...ash us, O God, with a richer sense of our mortality and of the fullness of life to which you call us.

Amen