



DUST & GLORY

DAILY BIBLE READINGS
FROM ASH WEDNESDAY
TO EASTER DAY

DAVID RUNCORN

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ASH WEDNESDAY TO EASTER DAY**

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INTRODUCTION

MAKING SPACE TO GROW

We do not grow by accident, and growing rarely happens in ideal circumstances. Nor is the task ever completed. Life is always a becoming. Growing requires a continual willingness to adapt, the capacity to make do and the imagination to improvise. There is also the constant challenge of being reconciled to what we would *not* have chosen in the life we find ourselves living. Our most significant growing is probably what happens while we are making other plans. Learning to respond and manage our choices and dilemmas fruitfully, we call ‘maturity’ and the Bible calls ‘wisdom’.

Growing needs time. It is not for hurrying. Growing is about something far more important than accumulating skills and knowledge. If life is to flourish in security and truth, it needs wisdom, which can be called a way of *slow* knowing. Contemporary life has no patience with slowness. If nothing else, it delays us, and what is the point of that? We have made speed a priority and have made a technology of information. We presume ‘knowing’ to be a right and we wield knowledge as a means to power—but do we know our perils? ‘We are now far too clever to survive without wisdom,’ wrote the pioneering economist E.F. Schumacher. The present global ecological crisis has been well described as ‘a crisis of knowledge without wisdom’.¹

The ancient Christian communities knew that the task of growing in the faith and life of Christ was searching and profound. It needs more than good intentions. One of their initiatives was to set aside a special period of prayer, self-examination and teaching for new followers who were preparing for their baptism on Easter Day. Over time, the value of this season became so apparent that it came to be commended to everyone in the church. This is the origin of the season of Lent. It is one of three 40-day periods in the church's year, the others being Advent (leading up to Christmas) and Easter (leading *from* the resurrection).

The name itself, 'Lent', comes from an ancient word meaning 'spring' or 'long', referring to that time in the year (in Western Europe) when the days are beginning to lengthen and the world is turning from the death of winter towards the warmth and promise of summer.

So this is a book to accompany the work of turning—the journey from death to life. It is not a how-to book. I hope it will feel more like a conversation. Its themes range across the whole business of living and believing. The daily reflections tend to explore questions rather than give answers, and at times you may well want to argue or protest. There are suggestions for the necessary self-examination and heart-searching that growing requires. Some chapters were unsettling and disturbing to write, as they must be if we are to seek authentic faith in a world like ours. At other times I hope you will be caught out by joy, surprised by laughter and stirred to curiosity and wonder. Growing into faithful living never happens without vulnerability: I hope you will also find sources of healing, mercy and rest in these pages, for whenever you may need them.

Just one feature of the book may need explanation. Books

that accompany this season stop at Easter, so they tend to miss out the resurrection. But risen life needs just as much discipline, nurture and attention as sin and penitence—perhaps more—and, while these qualities are lacking, it is perhaps not surprising if perceptions of Christian believing are closer to joyless denial than to the surprise of risen life. So, on each of the five Sundays (which is Resurrection Day), the focus in this book is on Easter and the risen life.

Please journey with the book at the pace you find helpful. No one will come checking if you take your own route and time across these days. But please, as a general rule, read more slowly than you normally do, and linger longer with what you find. It is the slow knowing that we need most. There is no hurry.

**ASH WEDNESDAY
TO SATURDAY**

ASH WEDNESDAY

WONDER

*O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens...
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established,
what are human beings that you are mindful of them...?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour...
you have put all things under their feet...
O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

PSALM 8:1, 3–6, 9

Picture a park on a warm summer afternoon. A couple have enjoyed a picnic and are dozing contentedly on the grass, unaware that a camera is hovering just above them. But we are looking through the camera.

At an unseen signal, it begins to rise vertically into the sky. The couple, the park, the neighbourhood and the city successively shrink into the distance. Before long, we have left planet earth altogether and are travelling deeper and deeper into space. Planets, stars and galaxies slide past as the camera continues out to the farthest reaches of the cosmos.

There in utter darkness the camera pauses for a moment before going into reverse. We begin a silent return across the vast tracts of the universe, back to earth and down, towards the city, the park, the sleeping couple and the remains of the picnic, where it all began.

But the camera doesn't stop there. When it reaches the couple, it continues its descent, right into the body of one of the sleepers. Moving through the blood vessels, membranes and cells, in ever finer detail, it reaches the micro-particles that lie at the source of human life as we know it.

Meanwhile, the couple on the picnic rug are completely unaware of it all. They are asleep.²

Being asleep, sleepwalking through life, is a common diagnosis that the ancient spiritual traditions offer for our human condition. 'Most people, even though they don't know it, are asleep. They're born asleep, they live asleep, they marry in their sleep, they breed children in their sleep, they die in their sleep without ever waking up. They never understand the loveliness and the beauty of this thing that we call human existence.' (Anthony de Mello)³

The awakening we need is not to some notion of usefulness, achievement or productivity. It is simply to a wondering, which is already there within us, but buried deep. This awakening transformed the faith of the writer G.K. Chesterton—the discovery that 'at the back of our brains, so to speak, there was a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our existence.' (G.K. Chesterton)⁴

People in early Christian icons are painted in the sort of proportions often found in children's drawings. Their eyes are saucer-wide, expressions fixed in astonishment at what they have been awakened to. Their mouths are very small but the ears are painted large. The message is clear: watch,

listen, wonder—and be slow to speak. This is not the time for chat or speculation.

How does such awakening come? We sometimes speak of a ‘wake-up call’—a moment in life that jolts and shocks us into new awareness. It may come in the encounter with a new culture or landscape that a holiday brings. We see the world in a new way, in a new light. The birth of a child often sparks an awakening of profound wonder. It is not uncommon for couples with little previous interest in spiritual life to awaken suddenly to a need and longing. The feeling can surface when life is under threat. Emerging from the shadow of a serious cancer scare, a friend writes of an awakened wonder in the ordinary things of life: ‘Things we take for granted, like having a shower, drinking orange juice, have an extraordinary brilliancy at the moment.’

I recall a time of personal exhaustion. Burned out on life, church and God, I booked a day at a monastery. Beyond thought, prayer or sleep, I simply sat in the garden for hours, staring at a small patch of grass between my feet. Nothing dramatic happened. I could not have coped if it had. But I remember, very slowly, beginning to notice just how much life there was in that grass—its shifting colour and texture in the sun, the dew, the tiny insects... and I began to awaken again to life.

Wonder, like reverence, is not for grasping to suit our own ends or needs. It requires a certain surrender, a self-forgetting. It is about paying attention to what is already present but too easily unnoticed. It takes practice, but it is all there waiting for me: ‘When I look...’

FOR REFLECTION

Choose something, anything—and for a few minutes simply give your undivided attention to it.

THURSDAY

LONGING

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.*

*My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.*

*When shall I come and behold
the face of God?*

*My tears have been my food...
while people say to me continually,
'Where is your God?'...*

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him.*

PSALM 42:1–3, 11

We are not by the leafy lakeside of an English country park here. A deer stands still in the heat of the day. Nostrils are lifted, quivering and straining for any hint of water on the parched breeze. Deer can scent water from up to five miles away, which is just as well. In this wilderness, thirst is a matter of life and death—and for this psalm writer the search for God is just that. Something has gone missing that he knows his life depends on.

Our most significant growing in life can often be traced to the experience of loss. Sometimes it is the impact of a particular event—a tragedy, perhaps. In the pain, in need of meaning and comfort, we find that answers that have worked for us until this point now sound hopelessly simplistic or even wrong. We must go searching with our questions, without yet knowing if we will find what we need to sustain life and faith.

Sometimes, without warning or reason, life that has been fulfilling just goes empty on us. Weariness descends. An activity that once contained degrees of meaning and security no longer does so. We are bored with what so recently stimulated. The music no longer excites. The words have emptied of meaning. Where has it all gone? Why am I downcast? How should I respond?

That seems to be the story behind this psalm. The excitement of faith has gone and the poet is missing it acutely. He feels mocked by others because he can no longer join in as he once did. Anyone who finds themselves on the edge of faith while in the midst of enthusiastic believers knows how that feels.

He cries out to God, who has vanished. He also talks in perplexity to his own soul. He doesn't know himself any more. 'Why am I feeling like this?' At such times it is easy to assume that the fault lies with us (and there are times when it may do), but notice that the poet does not make that assumption here.

When a crisis hit me, some years ago, I was on the edge of a breakdown and felt I was losing everything. The faith that had been with me for a lifetime offered no solace. In fact, it was part of the problem. I remember saying to my counsellor, 'I don't think I believe this any more.' The response was so wise: 'You do not look to me like someone who has lost their faith. But you are living out of a part of yourself that you

have not spent much time with before. So it is not surprising if you are feeling like a stranger to yourself.'

Our longings are always the starting place. They trace the contours of our desires. They map our dreams. They reveal our personal geography, so they are vocational in shape. Qualifications and questions that ask for 'yes' or 'no' answers are not of use here; nor is the interviewer's question, 'Do you think you have the skills and experience needed?' or, if the focus is religious, 'Do you believe God has called you?' There is a wiser question, still asked in monastic life at times of choice-making and commitment: 'What is your desire?' *This 'desire' is not the same as selfish desire.* It is a way of speaking about my most authentic self, the 'real me', as God has made me. The question is asked only after a long and careful discernment.

We must stay with the longing. Instead of trying to 'solve' it by searching for excitement, we must listen to it carefully. Monastic life has a saying for such times: 'Stay in your cell and your cell will teach you everything.' Of course, that is the last thing we want to do, but the answer to this restiveness is not distraction. The longing is the prayer, so pray it with all your heart.

A feature of those psalms that begin with distress and loss is that they often finish with praise. But 'happy ending' faith is not on offer here. The willingness to long, to thirst, to stay with the emptiness and the questions, brings its gift. The psalmist knows this.

So we wait in hope—for our longing is the clearest sign that what we seek is already to be found in us.

FOR REFLECTION

What is my desire?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Week 1: Becoming who I am

- What does ‘the fear of the Lord’ mean to you? Share the positive and negative associations of this phrase for you.
- Share ideas of what might constitute a ‘sustainable rhythm of life’ and how that might differ according to life circumstances.
- Discuss your experiences of prayer as complaint, lament or protest.

Week 2: The compass of our excitement

- How important for you is the receiving of Holy Communion? Can you articulate why it is—or why it is not?
- What resonances does the idea of ‘wilderness’ have for you, and why?
- Discuss your sense of what it means to call God ‘Father’, whether you find this a positive or negative concept, and why.

Week 3: In the midst of life

- What implications for faith does the scarred body of the risen Saviour suggest?
- If you had to identify yourself as an animal, which would you choose, and why?

Lent is one of the three 40-day 'seasons' in the church's year, besides Advent and the period from Easter to Pentecost. The name itself, Lent, derives from an ancient word meaning 'spring' or 'long', referring to the time of year when days are beginning to lengthen and the world is turning from winter cold and dark to the warmth and promise of spring. During this time, the church calls us to a special period of prayer, self-examination and teaching—and this book has been written to accompany you through that period, a time of turning from winter to spring, from death to life.

Dust and Glory ranges across the whole business of living and believing, where the questions are as important as the answers and may call us to deep heart-searching. The goal is always to draw us to authentic faith—a way of living and believing that is real and vulnerable, strong in knowing its limits, rooted in joy and wonder, blessed with the healing and merciful presence of God. Such faith acknowledges both the dust of our mortality and the glory that keeps breaking in with unexpected life, hope and new beginnings.

David Runcorn is a popular writer, speaker, teacher, retreat leader and spiritual guide. His books include *The Spirituality Workbook: a guide for pilgrims, explorers and seekers* and *Fear and Trust: God-centred leadership*. He lives in Gloucester where he is involved with the selection, training and support of people called to Christian ministry of all kinds.



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