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Dear friends,

Already the Icelandic ash cloud and the effects that it had upon us for a few days feel like a distant memory. Yet for those few days, with much of northern and western European airspace closed, we suddenly found ourselves back in a distant era. The vapour trails and sound of aircraft that for many of us have been part of our entire lives were gone. On the Sunday I had two services at Fryerning. Standing by the church and looking up into the sky the lack of aeroplanes was very obvious. There was just a beautiful blue sky, the sound of birds, and the distant rumble of the A12. With many people unable to return, this newly received sense of peace was coupled with anxiety and prayers for their safe return. Not only was it the airlines that were losing money, but as always it was some of the poorest people in the world who were being hardest hit. In Uganda I had seen where there and in Kenya large areas are given over to growing exotic flowers for our consumption. The farmers there had to let flowers rot, with no talk of compensation. It is strange that while many people say they do not believe in God, it can be commercially useful to call something an *Act of God* and then pay no insurance. Of course it was pressure from the powerful that led to the re-assessment of the dangers of the cloud by the scientists. I am sure those affected in eastern Africa, where faith is very real, saw the decision to fly the aeroplanes again as a real act of God.

My car had a covering of thicker dust than usual. Friends and family in London had even more of a covering of what was clearly ash from the volcano. On the media we were told not to wash it off as it was abrasive and could scratch the cars. So there it sat, ash on our cars. There are a number of specific mentions of the use of ash in the Bible. In the book of Job, in chapter 42, Job is sorry for the way that he has questioned God about the things that have happened in his life. He says, "Therefore I will despise myself and repent in dust and ashes".

Twelve chapters previously Job states that life has reduced him to dust and ashes. These were seen as a symbol of humiliation. In Genesis chapter 18 Abraham had said of himself that he was simply dust and ashes. On Ash Wednesday, when we have the opportunity to be marked with ash, it is symbolic of our need for personal repentance and also our acknowledgement that we are simply dust and ashes. In fact in the funeral service God is asked to return us to the dust from which we come.

In the New Testament, Jesus is recorded in Matthew chapter 11 talking of the use of ashes as a sign of repentance. He is angry at the cities of Korazin and Bethsaida. He has performed many miracles in these places. This had not been so they could admire him, but rather that the people should repent of their ways and change. Of course, they had not, and life had gone on as normal.

As I write this, the General Election has not yet taken place. As you read it, you know the outcome. But from either side of the election, one thing is very clear. Life cannot go on as before. All the parties were talking about the need for cuts. We live in a world that appears to have built everything on debt, with an expectation of continual growth and consequently no need to cut back. Now it would appear that everyone everywhere needs to face the consequences.

Perhaps we should see the ash from the Icelandic volcano as a reminder of the need for our world, not just our country, to repent from the ways of the past. This is not a party political point. This is a point about the underlying values and assumptions that have governed life for the period since there were the first vapour trails in the sky. As a child of the 1950s, "progress, progress" has been a mantra I have had ringing in my ears all my life. At school in the 1960s and 1970s wonderful visions were painted for us of the future. Many of them have proved to be illusions. Jesus told a parable about what happened to a house built on sand when the floods came. As we all need to reassess how we live, the values that Jesus gave us have proved enduring for two thousand years. Now would be a good time to repent and to remember what is really important.

Yours in Christ, *Patrick*