When was the last time you fell on your face? Literally at least, it’s only happened to me once. One sunny winter morning I was trotting merrily down a Shropshire hillside when I found myself flat on the ground: my face in the grass, mud and heather. The fall was so sudden that it didn’t register until it had happened: one moment I was upright, the next moment my teeth were in peaty soil. It’s the one occasion when I have literally tasted that graphic phrase that crops up from time to time in the Psalms: ‘his enemies shall lick the dust’. Mercifully, I was saved from the public shame implied in ‘licking the dust’ because I was on my own with no onlookers, but it was still a pretty humiliating experience. Or perhaps I should say humbling: I lay there for a good minute, registering what had happened, savouring my worm’s eye view of the world, looking at the twisted roots of the heather and seeing there a miniature forest, slowly checking that nothing was broken or sprained, piecing myself back together and brushing the soil of hands, legs and face as best I could.

Our English word humility derives from the Latin *humilitas*, whose origins lie in *humus*, the soil. One way of picturing humility is to see it as the virtue that brings us down to earth, that reminds us that we are, like Adam, ‘of the earth, earthy’. We don’t, perhaps, need to lick the dust, but the call to humility points us back to our origin and onwards to our end – ‘dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return’ – back to the humble source and onward to the humble goal that are ours, save for the glory that is also ours in Christ.

I’ve only once fallen literally on my face, but we have, all of us, done so in other, figurative, ways. In the prophet Ezekiel’s description from our first reading his fall is almost as sudden as mine:
Then he brought me by way of the north gate to the front of the temple; and I looked, and lo! the glory of the LORD filled the temple of the LORD; and I fell upon my face.

The glory Ezekiel meets is overwhelming. To encounter it is, simply, to fall on one’s face. There appears to be no moment of reflection or decision: the glory itself compels it. This is what happens when mortal flesh encounters the glory of God. We can get a flavour of this, I think, if we reflect on the experience of falling in love. The phrase is telling: we fall in love. We don’t choose to love; love is a state of being into which we stumble. To fall in love is, in a sense, to fall on one’s face. Not in adoration of the other person, nor even infatuated with the experience of being in love; but simply in wonder that love is possible in the first place. We may begin to hazard rational explanations: why him, why her – she has such a lovely voice, his eyes are so deep – but love is as much about the transformation it brings to our perception of the world and its possibilities as it is about lover and beloved: to fall in love is to see everything anew: to fall on one’s face, to taste, feel, see, hear and smell everything afresh.

Once a year at the Vigil on Maundy Thursday, after we have washed one another’s feet, celebrated the eucharist, stripped the cathedral of its furnishings, dimmed the lights and walked with Christ to the altar of repose – gone ‘to dark Gethsemane’, there to wait with him; once a year, under cover of the dark, I go down on both knees and prostrate myself, forehead and face on the ground. It feels a most unnatural thing to do, out of character and deeply un-English, but it is a small annual ritual by which I seek to worship and adore Christ and to honour this place in which we seek to serve him. Once again I literally taste, smell, see, hear and touch the fabric of this place of worship in a new way: the floor of the Lady Chapel, which I barely notice for 364 days of the year takes on a new physicality and I learn again the marvellous truth: that faith in the crucified and risen Christ isn’t a set of propositions, but a new relationship fleshed out for real in the people he has redeemed and the places in which we gather to worship him, to proclaim him and to serve him in one another.

I started this annual prostration after a visit to the Holy Land nineteen years ago. Our trip coincided with one of the periodic escalations of violence that sweep through that terribly divided part of the world. This had the unexpected consequence that there were very few other tourists or pilgrims and when we visited the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem we had the building almost to ourselves. Descending down into the crypt, to the small chapel that marks the spot where the crib that held the infant Christ is said to have stood, we saw the star that marks the place of the incarnation. And we knelt and
kissed it. For all the silver and marble that surrounds it, for all the lamps and candles and gaudy embellishments, that moment when I metaphorically fell on my face to kiss a silver star in a stone floor is one that will always stay with me: knowing Christ Jesus as the one who has come, for me and for all people: ‘for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples’

To fall on one’s face is humiliating – a reminder of one’s fragile fallibility. But to fall on one’s face is also to learn that hardest of lessons for us modern western men and women: it’s not all about us. It’s not about my self-determination, my decisions, my will, my flourishing – we are constantly told that these are what matter most. They do matter, but they don’t matter most. What matters most, what puts those things in their proper place, is the prior impulse deep in the heart of our humanity: the desire, the compulsion even, to rest in awe and wonder at the mystery of our being, made and re-made in Christ.

‘We have waited on your loving-kindness, O God, • in the midst of your temple’, says this morning’s psalm. Like Simeon, like Anna, let us do the same, not just in the temple of this cathedral, but in the temple that is our body, the temple that is God’s world: learning in humility to seek and see God afresh.

‘I looked, and lo! the glory of the LORD filled the temple of the LORD; and I fell upon my face’.

In nomine…