

Ashes

The Dutch priest, Henri Nouwen, once described Lent as a time to re-focus and to re-enter a place of *truth*. It is here where we find our true identity. Ash Wednesday is the best way to begin a season which calls us into self-examination as well as self-denial, into deeper contemplation about the mystery and grace of God's mercy, and towards more radical giving towards those most in need of comfort, sustenance, and hope. The ancient observance of Ash Wednesday reminds us that we are mortal. It causes us to pause and look at our lives, remember what we are made of, remember where we are going- and encourages us to fully immerse ourselves in the Lenten season.

"Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." This line from Genesis reminds us that our lives on this earth won't last forever. We are a finite people who hold hope in something infinite and beyond ourselves. The ceremonial ashing (which may take a different form this year due to the pandemic) makes us walking witnesses of that truth. Heaping ashes upon the head, rending the garment, and donning sackcloth were all outward signs of penitence in biblical times. Such a display was one of abject humility and repentance, but could also turn into an occasion for infighting and ego-inflation. Ashing is an ancient and venerable custom, but it must be symbolic of an interior change of heart, a recognition of our human frailty and our desire to change the course of our lives so that God, our Creator, Redeemer and Life-giver may come first in all our thoughts, words and actions.

Prayers to Remember

TURN thou us, O good Lord, and so shall we be turned. Be favourable, O Lord, Be favourable to thy people, Who turn to thee in weeping, fasting, and praying. For thou art a merciful God, Full of compassion, long-suffering, and of great pity. Thou sparest when we deserve punishment, And in thy wrath thinkest upon mercy. Spare thy people, good Lord, Spare them, and let not thine heritage be brought to confusion. Hear us, O Lord, for thy mercy is great, And after the multitude of thy mercies look upon us; Through the merits and mediation of thy blessed Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Collect from the Communion Service appointed for Ash Wednesday in the Book of Common Prayer (1662)

17th February
2021

Ash Wednesday

Towards the Light



The ashes we use are the burnt palms from last year's celebration of Palm Sunday. We begin our Lenten journey aware of where we are going. We want to enter more fully into the mystery of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. That is the purpose of our journey. It is why for many hundreds of years, Christians have marked their heads with His cross on this day. Our Lenten disciplines are not an effort to save ourselves. We have been saved by Jesus' all-sufficient sacrifice on the cross. Our self-denial helps us, in the darkness that surrounds us, to prepare ourselves to receive His light. This is a journey to the Easter font, a journey towards the light, when we will renew the promises of our Baptism, remembering that in dying with him in the waters of Baptism, we are re-born with him to everlasting life. The journey to new life begins today.

From the Fathers

'Though I am but dust and ashes, suffer me to utter my plea to thy mercy; suffer me to speak, since it is to God's mercy that I speak and not to man's scorn. From thee too I might have scorn, but thou wilt return and have compassion on me... I only know that the gifts thy mercy had provided sustained me from the first moment... All my hope is naught save in thy great mercy. Grant what thou dost command, and command what thou wilt.'

From Confessions by St Augustine of Hippo (354-430, bishop, theologian)