



ASH WEDNESDAY AND LENT



Ash Wednesday is the first day of **Lent** for Western Christian churches.



What is Lent?

Lent is a season of forty days (not including Sundays), starting with Ash Wednesday and ending on the evening of Holy Saturday- the day before Easter Sunday.

The forty days remind Christians of the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness, being tested by the devil, before he began his public ministry- which was when Jesus travelled, preached about God and performed miracles.

You can read about this in the Bible, in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

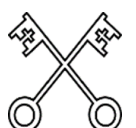
Please see our separate resource for the International Children's Bible version of these passages.

For Christians, the forty days of Lent are a time of:

Reflection- thinking about the type of person we are and how we can be a better person and Christian

Repentance- being and saying sorry to God for our faults and mistakes

Preparation for Easter- an important time, when we celebrate Jesus's resurrection





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Why are there forty days of Lent?

As mentioned above, the forty days remind Christians of the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness.

Forty is one of the significant and symbolic numbers in the Bible. Other examples of the use of the number forty include in the stories of Moses and Elijah, who are both recorded in the Old Testament of the Bible as having undertaken forty day fasts. Another example is that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years before they reached the Promised Land.

In the Bible forty is the number used to represent a long period of time in which a person or group of people is tested or has to be patient and wait or prepare for something important.

Lent in former times

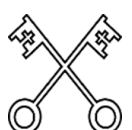
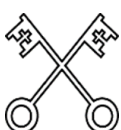
Going right back to the early days of the Christian church, Lent was traditionally a time of fasting, following the example of Jesus in the wilderness before he started his public ministry.

Fasting during Lent is also connected with it being a time of reflection and preparation for Easter, with a focus on avoiding distractions and personal pleasures and concentrating on renewing our relationship with God.

Another tradition during Lent, is that money saved by fasting has been given to those in need.

Repentance and ashes

Even earlier, in Old Testament Biblical times, fasting was associated with acts of repentance (being and saying sorry). People or communities who had sinned would wear sackcloth (clothing made of a very rough fabric usually made from goats' hair) and sprinkle themselves with ashes, as an outward sign or symbol of their repentance.





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Why is the first day of Lent called Ash Wednesday?

Some churches hold special services on the first day of Lent, in which worshippers are marked with ashes.

The symbol of ashes

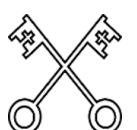
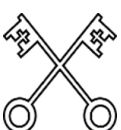


Ashes are an ancient sign of penitence (being sorry). From the 11th century onwards, it became the custom to start Lent- a time of repentance and preparation for Easter- by being marked in ash with the sign of the cross. This is how Ash Wednesday got its name.

Making the sign of the cross in ashes or putting a mark with ashes on the person's forehead is a reminder to us that we are human beings, who make mistakes, but that we can all be forgiven by God if we are sorry and ask for his forgiveness.

Having ashes on your forehead is a symbol of being sorry for your sins and asking for God's forgiveness.

The sign of the cross on the forehead also has another symbolic meaning: it is a reminder of when we were baptised and became a member of God's family.





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When the ashes are put on a person's forehead, these words are often said by the person giving out the ashes:

***“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.
Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.”***

The first sentence above echoes the words God speaks to Adam in Genesis 3:19: *“For dust you are and to dust you shall return.”* These words remind us that we were made by God and that we are only human. We are nothing without God.

The second sentence is an instruction or reminder to us to try to be a better person and Christian.

“Ashes to Go”

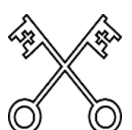
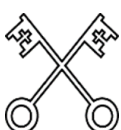
Many people receive their ashes in a church, but in recent years there has been something called “Ashes to Go”, where the ashes have been taken out into the community and given out in shopping centres, railway stations and other public places as people go about their daily business.



Ash Wednesday during the coronavirus pandemic

This year, because of the coronavirus pandemic, some people will mark Ash Wednesday at home with their families and put ashes on each other's foreheads there, rather than go to a church.

The practice of ashing will also be different in churches this year, with ashes being sprinkled on a person's head, without words being said.





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Where do the ashes come from?

The ashes used on Ash Wednesday are made by burning the palm crosses that were blessed on Palm Sunday, the year before. In some churches, members of the congregation are asked to return the palm crosses to church before Lent, so that they can be burned and then used as ashes for the congregation on Ash Wednesday.



Here are last year's palm crosses being burned outside Bradford Cathedral, to make the ashes that will be used at this year's Ash Wednesday service at the Cathedral.

What does the inside of a church look like during Lent?



The colour for Lent is **purple**, as you can see from this altar frontal in Bradford Cathedral and the stole (like a scarf) that Dean Jerry is wearing in the photos above where he is giving out ashes.

In churches, purple is the colour used to symbolise repentance and preparation.

On Good Friday, when we remember Jesus's death, the colour changes to red; at Easter, gold and white are used.

The colours in a church help us to remember what part of the church year it is.

As Lent is a period of preparation and reflection, avoiding distractions, churches are also usually kept bare of flowers during this time.

