

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday signals the beginning of Lent. Lent is a period of the forty days (not counting Sundays) that precedes Easter. Every year in normal times we begin the season of Lent with the imposition of ashes as we begin to focus on the passion, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lent has been part of the common life of the Church since the early part of the fourth century. It reminds us of the forty-day fast of our Lord in the wilderness. Lent is a time of prayer, fasting, and repentance, intended to prepare us for Easter.

The custom of placing ashes as a sign of penitence originated under Pope Gregory I, who was Bishop of Rome from 590 A.D. to 604.

Those of us who have fireplaces or charcoal grills know all about ashes. They are what is left after combustion takes place. Gardeners know that ashes can be used to help grow plants. But basically ashes are worthless. In fact they are often less than worthless – they are a hindrance and a liability. You can't make ashes pretty by painting them, and you can't make ashes smell good by spraying perfume on them. Ashes are just ashes.

And so it is with us – people are just people. When all is said and done, no matter how much righteous paint we cover ourselves with, no matter how much virtuous perfume we spray on ourselves, we are fallen and sinful. Christians are, after all, redeemed sinners, but remain sinners in need of God.

The Bible has a number of references about ashes. The first comes in Genesis 18:27. Abraham is bargaining with God to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah when he suddenly realizes that he, a mere mortal, has been speaking to almighty God. He says, "*I have been so bold to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes.*" The words "*dust and ashes*" are used together in Job 30:19 and 42:6. The Hebrew words have the same consonant sounds. One might rightfully conclude that the word "*ash*" carries with it much the same theological connotation as the word "*dust*." Dust and ashes are also synonyms of the word "*earth*" (*adamah*). From this word we derive Adam and the Hebrew word for man. Genesis 3:19 states the words around which the Ash Wednesday service centres, "*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.*" Ecclesiastes 3:20 says, "*All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.*" Ashes are a symbol of our mortality. We are tied to the earth and nothing in us is immortal unless God gives it to us.

Ashes are also a symbol of repentance. In Jonah 3:6, after hearing of Jonah's message of repentance, the King of Nineveh puts on sackcloth and sits in ashes. In those days such Kings were considered God-like. By sitting in ashes, the King of Nineveh shows his people that he is not immortal.

In Numbers 19:9 and 17, ashes are used in the rites of purification. Hebrews draws directly upon this symbolism in Hebrews 9: 13-14, "*The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!*"

So we in the Church militant continue the traditions of the past as part of the living Church, and sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people, and demonstrate our sorrow over sin by having the priest offer up repentance kneeling between the porch and the altar as we ask the Lord to spare us. We have ashes placed on our foreheads as a reminder of who we are and who God is and what God has done for us.

We do not believe the ashes have any magical power to purify us of our sin. Only Jesus Christ can accomplish that. However, their use can remind us of the cleansing power of Jesus Christ. The sign of ash signifies our need for self-examination and penitence during this holy season of Lent that we may be broken open and prepared for new life as the baptized people of God.

We begin this holy season by acknowledging our need for repentance, and for the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We begin our journey to Easter with the sign of ashes. This ancient sign speaks of our mortality, of the frailty and uncertainty of human life. But in Christ, the ashes are a sign of hope.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Lent by prayer and fasting, by works of love, and by reading and meditating on the Word of God.