



A guide for everyone



What is it?

Ash Wednesday is the first day of the season of Lent when many followers of Jesus will attend a church service at which they will receive the Imposition of Ashes. This is when the Priest makes the sign of the cross on a person's forehead with the burned ashes of last year's Palm Crosses, usually mixed with a bit of holy oil. As the Priest makes the sign of the cross, they say these or similar words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return".

Why are ashes used?

Ashes are a Biblical and ancient sign of:

- our mortality (we all die, one day, and our bodies will return to dust – see Genesis 3:19) and
- repentance (see Job 42:6, Daniel 9:3, Esther 14:1-3).

In the Bible ashes were an outward sign, that everyone could see, of the turning of a person's heart back to God and away from sin (repentance).

On special holy days the whole community would join in putting ashes on themselves and pray for God to have mercy on them all.

Since at least the eleventh century followers of Jesus have been marked with ashes on Ash Wednesday and many also fast (abstain from food) in order to draw closer to God.



Now let's have a quick look at 3 of the scriptures often read at the Ash Wednesday service because they'll help us understand more about this holy day.

Grab a Bible and read **Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**. Here's a few notes about what's happening:

- this is a description of a public day of fasting where the whole community, not just one person, was participating
- they put on sackcloth (rough, scratchy fabric, also a sign of repentance and mourning) & ashes
- they did this to show their repentance (turning away from sin and turning toward God) for their sins & as a prayer that God would have mercy on the whole community

Lent is a time for us all to "return to me [God] with all our heart" (verse 12) and the ashes an outward sign of our inward repentance as we do so.

So we begin Lent with a public fast and public repentance as the community of God's people, but during the rest of the season of Lent we move to private fasting, prayer, and almsgiving (spiritual disciplines).

Now read **Matthew 6:1-6;16-21**.

- Here Jesus talks about all 3 of the spiritual disciplines that are traditional in Lent
- He teaches His followers not to do spiritual disciplines to be seen or praised by others; rather do them unto God and God sees what is done
- Jesus says WHEN you give to the needy, WHEN you pray, WHEN you fast, not IF. Jesus expected His followers would be doing these things!

In Lent, followers of Jesus intensify their prayer, fasting, and almsgiving that they are already doing, so they can draw closer to God in this season.



Last, read 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10:

- Here, St. Paul is writing to the church in Corinth.
- In these verses he says, "We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."
- He reminds them that God sent Jesus, who had no sin, to take our sin so that we could be made clean (righteous) to God
- He goes on to say, "...now is the day of salvation."

This encouragement from St. Paul is for us today too and it's especially appropriate to read it on Ash Wednesday, as Lent begins and we prepare ourselves to remember Jesus' death and celebrate His glorious resurrection.

Today is a gift from God and none of us is promised tomorrow, so today repent, pray for God's forgiveness, and be made righteous (clean) in God's sight. God is faithful to forgive us every time we come in repentance!



More from the Bible:

Other scriptures you can read include:

- Psalm 103:8-18
- Psalm 51
- Isaiah 58:1-12

You can use the prayer below as a great way to start the season of Lent. It is the prayer of the day for Ash Wednesday:

"Almighty and everlasting God, you despise nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our brokenness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen"

