

## **Ash Wednesday**

### **What is it about?**

**Ash Wednesday marks the start of the Season of Lent in the Church's year. Lent lasts for forty days and ends with the events of Holy Week and Easter commemorating Jesus' death and resurrection.**

**Lent is called a 'penitential' season and is signified by a change in the colours in many churches to purple. The Bible tells us that Jesus spent forty days by himself in the wilderness, denying himself food and concentrating on his purpose and ministry from God, experiencing temptation and putting those temptations away. So in Lent, Christians have traditionally used the time to reflect on their lives and to sort out where we have not been the best we can be. Ash Wednesday provides an opportunity to begin that process, to admit where we have failed or gone wrong and to receive the strength and encouragement to live better lives as God wants for us.**

**The Ash is traditionally made from the burned palm leaves from last year's Palm Sunday services. The ash is mixed with a little water or oil to make it stick together and it is usually blessed by the priest in the churches where it is used with holy water. People are invited to come up to the priest at the altar and have a small amount of ash traced on their foreheads in the sign of the cross. The priest says some biblical words, usually 'remember that you are dust and to dust you will return' or 'repent and hear the good news' or 'turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel'. In some other churches where ash is not used another kind of act of repentance might be used instead. There are all kinds of ways congregations can say sorry to God together.**

**Ash is used because it has the symbolic significance of repentance in the Bible and this is reflected in the readings for today. For many Christians it is usual to fast or restrict food on Ash Wednesday and for many to restrict items of diet or give up something during Lent itself as Jesus himself went without during his time in the wilderness.**

**First Reading Joel 2: 1-18**

**Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
    sound the alarm on my holy mountain!  
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
    for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—  
a day of darkness and gloom,  
    a day of clouds and thick darkness!  
Like blackness spread upon the mountains  
    a great and powerful army comes;  
their like has never been from of old,  
    nor will be again after them  
in ages to come.**

**Fire devours in front of them,  
    and behind them a flame burns.  
Before them the land is like the garden of Eden,  
    but after them a desolate wilderness,  
and nothing escapes them.**

**They have the appearance of horses,  
    and like warhorses they charge.  
As with the rumbling of chariots,  
    they leap on the tops of the mountains,  
like the crackling of a flame of fire  
    devouring the stubble,  
like a powerful army  
    drawn up for battle.**

**Before them peoples are in anguish,  
    all faces grow pale.  
Like warriors they charge,  
    like soldiers they scale the wall.  
Each keeps to its own course,  
    they do not swerve from their paths.  
They do not jostle one another,  
    each keeps to its own track;**

**they burst through the weapons  
and are not halted.**

**They leap upon the city,  
they run upon the walls;  
they climb up into the houses,  
they enter through the windows like a thief.**

**The earth quakes before them,  
the heavens tremble.**

**The sun and the moon are darkened,  
and the stars withdraw their shining.**

**The LORD utters his voice  
at the head of his army;**

**how vast is his host!  
Numberless are those who obey his command.**

**Truly the day of the LORD is great;  
terrible indeed—who can endure it?**

**Yet even now, says the LORD,  
return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
rend your hearts and not your clothing.**

**Return to the LORD, your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
and relents from punishing.**

**Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,  
and leave a blessing behind him,  
a grain-offering and a drink-offering  
for the LORD, your God?**

**Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
sanctify a fast;**

**call a solemn assembly;  
gather the people.**

**Sanctify the congregation;  
assemble the aged;**

**gather the children,  
even infants at the breast.**

**Let the bridegroom leave his room,  
and the bride her canopy.**

**Between the vestibule and the altar  
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.**

**Let them say, 'Spare your people, O LORD,  
and do not make your heritage a mockery,  
a byword among the nations.**

**Why should it be said among the peoples,  
"Where is their God?" '**

### **God's Response and Promise**

**Then the LORD became jealous for his land,  
and had pity on his people.**

## **What's going on?**

The prophet Joel speaks of a time of darkness and fear for those who have turned away from God and forgotten about him. Joel speaks of the fear of punishment and anger against a godless people, but instead God is found to offer a second chance: 'he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.' So it is possible to make amends, to turn away from wrongdoing, and to carry out of acts of repentance. This means anyone can come back to God, search for him and find him.

### **Psalm 51 (psalm 50 RC)**

#### **Prayer for Cleansing and Pardon**

**To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him,  
after he had gone in to Bathsheba.**

**Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.**

**Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.**

**For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.  
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgement.  
Indeed, I was born guilty,  
a sinner when my mother conceived me.**

**You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.  
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.  
Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.  
Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.**

**Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.**

**Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.  
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.**

**O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.  
For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.  
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.**

## **What's going on?**

This beautiful psalm is often called the penitential psalm because of its cry to God for forgiveness, in acknowledgement of wrong doing. The psalmist is profoundly aware of his sin and how this has separated him from God and he is desperately sorry. He sees restoration in terms of being washed clean, purged and restored, made anew, and this will allow him to praise God and tell others about him. After God has taken away sin the proper response is thanksgiving and praise that all the misery, guilt and anxiety that comes from doing wrong is taken away.

### **2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10**

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,

'At an acceptable time I have listened to you,  
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.'

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything

## **What's going on?**

**In his letter to his friends in Corinth, St Paul says that it is important to be reconciled to God. Jesus' death and resurrection have made salvation possible for all, so there is no obstacle preventing human beings from this reconciliation with God. It is now the task of Christians to tell other people about what God has done in Jesus, to be 'ambassadors' and to do this no matter what the circumstances. Yet people who are reconciled to God live in a different way and respond to hardships and difficulties differently. Christians are not exempt from the bad things, but faith makes it possible to deal with them positively. We therefore need a time of repentance to enable us to live fully in Christ so that even if we have nothing, yet we possess everything.**

**Gospel: Matthew 6.1-6; 16-21**

#### **Concerning Almsgiving**

**'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.**

**'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.**

#### **Concerning Prayer**

**'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.**

#### **Concerning Fasting**

**'And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your**

head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

### **Concerning Treasures**

**'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

## **What's going on?**

**This passage deals with hypocrisy and humility. God is not interested in a lot of show, or people making out that they are more pious and holy than others. All that does is show that they are busy thinking about how they look to their neighbours, rather than truly concentrating on their relationship with God. Jesus focuses on giving money to the poor, praying and fasting. These are all ways in which we can go forward on the spiritual journey, but if we are doing it just so others can notice and be impressed then the real spiritual purpose of giving, praying and denying ourselves is lost. So Ash Wednesday is not about looking holy or 'giving up' something just to impress others, but finding time to learn what giving our money, our praise and thanks to God and our self-denial is actually about. All these things are about gifts we can give to others, so that we stop being selfish and self-interested. Once we have done that we are ready to grow spiritually and this is what God wants for us. As the psalmist says, God does not want animal sacrifices, but for us to know ourselves and be sorry in our deepest heart.**