

March 1 - Ash Wednesday

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday. But why 'Ash' Wednesday? The reason has to do with getting things right between you and God, and the tradition goes right back to the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, the Israelites often sinned. When they finally saw their evil ways as God saw them, they could do nothing but repent in sorrow. They mourned for the damage they had done. As part of this repentance, they covered their heads with ashes, an outward sign of their heart-felt acknowledgement of sin. (See Genesis 18:27; 2 Samuel 13:19; Job 2:8, 30:19; Isaiah 58:5; Jeremiah 6:26; Jonah 3:6)

In the very early Christian Church, the yearly 'class' of penitents had ashes sprinkled over them at the beginning of Lent. They were turning to God for the first time, and mourning their sins. But soon many other Christians wanted to take part in the custom, and to do so at the very start of Lent. They heeded Joel's call to 'rend your hearts and not your garments' (Joel 2:12-19). Ash Wednesday became known as either the 'beginning of the fast' or 'the day of the ashes'.

The collect for today goes back to the Prayer Book, and stresses the penitential character of the day. It encourages us with the reminder of the readiness of God to forgive us and to renew us.

*Almighty and everlasting God,
You hate nothing that you have made
And forgive the sins of all those who are penitent:
Create and make in us new and contrite hearts
That we, worthily lamenting our sins
And acknowledging our wretchedness,
May receive from you, the God of all mercy,
Perfect remission and forgiveness;
Through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
Who is alive and reigns with you,
In the unity of the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and for ever.*

The actual custom of 'ashing' was abolished at the Reformation, though the old name for the day remained. Today, throughout the Church of England, receiving the mark of ashes on one's forehead is optional. Certainly the mark of ashes on the forehead reminds people of their mortality: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return..." (Genesis 3:19)

The late medieval custom was to burn the branches used on Palm Sunday in the previous year in order to create the ashes for today.