

## Ash Wednesday Reflections

February 17, 2021

Tomorrow is Ash Wednesday. The first day of Lent and we mark it by the imposition of ashes in the form of a cross – on our foreheads.

Ashes have always been a sign of repentance, and examples of this can be found frequently in scripture. In the book of Jonah, the sinful Ninevites responded to Jonah's call to repent by putting on sackcloth and *sitting in ashes*.

Some of us become self-conscious about a little mark on our foreheads but can you imagine what you would look like after sitting in ashes?

Scripture also tells us that Job, after enduring ed his trials and tribulations, repents before God with dust and ashes.

And that is not much really compared to Jeremiah, who calls for Israel's repentance by putting on sackcloth and *rolling in ashes*.

Finally, Jesus admonishes certain cities for their lack of repentance, and their unwillingness to put on ashes and turn to God.

Since the days of the early church, Christians have adopted this practice as a mark of penitence.

**Ashes are burned. They are spent.** They are black and grey, charred and useless. **Ashes are universal** – all things, when put into a fire with enough heat, will turn to ashes. Ashes remind us that all things are temporary in our world, including us. Next to taxes, it's said that the only other certainty in life is that we will all, one day, become ashes... dust... our lives will be spent.

In the book of Genesis, God tells Adam, "Dust you are, and to dust you will return." There's no mixed message there. All human beings are given life, but in the same moment that we take our first breath, we get closer and closer to our last. "Remember... you are dust. And to dust you will return." That's humbling news, isn't it?

There's an episode of *The Simpsons* in which Homer is told by his doctor that he has only a few days to live. He is understandably frightened, but very soon after this dire pronouncement, he shows remarkable fortitude.

Homer makes a list of all the things that he would like to do before he dies, and the list is full of things like ride in a blimp and tell off his boss.

But the list also contains items like making amends with the neighbor who he's always borrowing things from but never returning.

Homer also realizes that not only has he not been a model neighbor, but also not the best father to his children. So, he spends quality time with his son, and listens to his daughter play the saxophone one last time instead of telling her to stop with all that racket. This all might seem very trivial, especially since *The Simpsons* is nothing more than a cartoon.

**But I think there's truth to the notion that when we come face to face with the temporary nature of life and the certainty of death, we immediately wonder if we've used this gift of life as God intended.** We think of our sinfulness, and we know immediately that we have work to do before we die.

So, how would you live if you knew that your days were numbered? Would you be more kind? More loving? Would you treat your friends differently? Your enemies? Would you make more time for family?

Would you say, "I'm sorry" to the people that you've hurt? Would you be more mindful of suffering in the world?

Would you want to share a little bit more of what you have with those who have nothing? What would you do? How would you live? What kinds of things would be on your list?

Death, sinfulness, repentance... these are the things that these ashes symbolize for us.

Ash Wednesday reminds us first that we are dust, and to dust we will return. Life is fleeting. Time is short.

*And* the ashes remind us that we are fallen, and we can't get up on our own. We need God's help. We need God's forgiveness and God's grace. We need God's love.

And that, my friends, is the hope that is smeared in ash on our foreheads, that God's love has reached through our sinfulness, through the grim shadow of death, to the dust and the ashes of human life. We may be dust, but dust that we are, we are loved. As Paul writes, we are accounted dead... and yet terrifically alive. We have nothing, and yet by God's love we have it all. Nothing in this world, even death, can separate you from God's love in Jesus Christ. That is the secret scratched in ashes and imposed upon our foreheads. Nothing can separate you from God's love.

Let us begin Lent.

## Ash Wednesday Scripture Readings

### **Job 42: 2-6**

Then Job replied to the Lord:

"I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.

"You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.'

My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.

Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

### **Genesis 3:19**

<sup>19</sup> By the sweat of your face You shall eat bread, Until you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return."

### **Matthew 11:29-31**

Then Jesus criticized the cities where he did most of his miracles. Jesus criticized those cities because the people there did not change their lives and stop sinning.

Jesus said, "It will be bad for you Chorazin. It will be bad for you Bethsaida. I did many miracles in you. If those same miracles had happened in Tyre and Sidon, then those people in Tyre and Sidon would have changed their lives a long time ago.

Those people would have worn sackcloth and put ashes on themselves to show that they were sorry for their sins."

## **Prayer for Ash Wednesday / February 17<sup>th</sup>**

On this Wednesday, we submit our ashen way to you – you Easter parade of newness.

Before the sun sets, take our Wednesday and Easter us, Easter us to joy and energy and courage and freedom;

Easter us that we may be fearless for your truth.

Come here and Easter our Wednesday with mercy and justice and peace and generosity.

We pray as we wait for the Risen One who comes soon.