



“All About Ashes”

Ash Wednesday Service
February 17th, 2010 - 7:00pm
Ecotrust Conference Room

Ash Wednesday” by Henry Boonstra

Why Wednesday?

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. The early church determined that the Lenten period of fasting and renewal should correspond to Christ’s fasting (Matt. 4:2), and by counting forty days back from Easter (excluding Sundays, which remain “feast” days), arrived at the Wednesday seven weeks before Easter.

At one time Lent was primarily viewed as a period during which converts prepared for baptism on Easter Sunday, but later the season became a general time of penitence and renewal for all Christians. And Ash Wednesday became the day that marked the beginning of the Lenten renewal.

Why “Ash”?

Ashes have a long history in biblical and church traditions. In Scripture ashes (dust) symbolize frailty or death (Gen. 18:27), sadness or mourning (Esther 4:3), judgment (Lam. 3:16), and repentance (Jon. 3:6). Some traditions also have considered ash a purifying or cleansing agent.

All these images are caught up in the church’s use of ashes as a symbol appropriate for Lent. In Christ’s passion we see God’s judgment on evil; in our penitence we express sorrow and repentance for our sins; in our rededication we show that we are purified and renewed.

The ash used in Ash Wednesday worship services is usually the ashes from the palm leaves of the previous year’s Palm Sunday celebration. Mixed with water or oil, the ash is carried in a small dish; as the minister goes from person to person, he or she dips a thumb in the ash and makes a cross on each forehead (“imposition”). And to each person the minister says, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,” or, “Repent, and believe the gospel.”

The cleansing motif of ashes is reiterated in the psalm reading that follows: “Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin” (Ps. 51:2). And the ultimate outcome for the penitent child of God is reflected in the

closing prayer: “. . .that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy, so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy. . .” (Book of Common Prayer).

Ashes? Yes!

Ashes? Yes, but don't bother coming up if it's only a novelty, only a curious ritual, only a substitute. The prophet Joel says, “It may be O.K. to rend your garments and douse yourself with a bucket of ashes, but if it's only a ritual—don't bother. Rend your hearts, and ask for forgiveness.” Kneel down here, but only if your heart and spirit is submissive to the Lord.

Ashes? Yes, but Make Your Heart Right

Why ashes? When I clean out my fireplace, I get streaks of dirt on my hands, and the dead leftovers get put in the trash. Ashes are inert, dead, dirty. And maybe that's why God's people of old put ashes on their heads—to show that they were mortal and spiritually empty. Ashes became a symbol for the barrenness of their lives, of their need for forgiveness, and of their desire for renewal.

Yes, you may wish to come to have ashes imposed on your head, but remember, probably nothing mysterious or magical or mystical will happen. Rather we do this to show that with God's ancient people, we know in our bones and skin that we, in ourselves, are dead, and we say, “Lord, we repent in dust and ashes. Forgive us. Revive us again.”

Ashes? Yes, but Do Justice

Ashes? Yes, it's the right kind of ritual. But again, don't bother if this is a substitute for living right. The Lord thunders through the prophet Isaiah: I'm tired of your church services, your sermons, your Praise & Worship, your seeker services, your Ash Wednesday rituals. These things mean nothing if you're not obedient to me, and if you don't undo the violence in your society, the injustice that cries to heaven. The ashes on your forehead should make you work for justice for the poor and homeless, for peace in South Africa and Afghanistan, and against racism on your campus.

Ashes? Yes, but Seek New Life in Christ

Finally—ashes only because they will be applied in the form of a cross. Ashes of deadness only because the cross has given us new life. In celebrating the church year, always remember that even during Easter we still see the outline of the cross; and during Lent we already see the promise of the open tomb.

We leave the service quietly, meditatively, but also joyfully. We are sinners, but forgiven sinners. We lift high the cross. We go though Lent with renewed gratitude to Christ, with new discipline and dedication. You may keep the ashes on your forehead for the day (if you don't feel too self-conscious about it), but we know that Christ has already turned our ashes into the garland of victory.

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