

worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

Ash Wednesday
5th March 2025
The Revd Andy Braunston

Note

It is traditional to make a sign of the cross on people's foreheads in ash. If you wish to do this you could make the ash by finding some of last year's Palm Crosses, breaking these into small pieces and burning and then, using a pestle and mortar, grind the bits left down into a fine powder. This is then mixed with a little olive oil to get a paste which is then used to mark the forehead. You should also have some water available and a towel to wash hands! You could have one person impose ashes or get those who wish to take part to stand in a circle and, by passing the bowl with ash around, each person could impose ash on the next person. As they do so the following words are said: Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Repent and believe in the Gospel.

Today we mark the start of Lent – a time of preparation for Easter. We prepare through attending to the spiritual aspects in our lives, with prayer, giving and maybe through fasting but those preparations are always grounded in the earthly realities around us. Ash is not only a symbol of repentance but a visual reminder of the aftermath of the dreadful wild fires in California as a reminder to us of how human made climate change continues to demand our attention and action.

Call to Worship

Come to pray, come to seek, come to rest, come to be changed, come to worship.

Nothing is worthy of worship except God!

Come to turn your lives back to God, to confront temptation face to face,
to rend not your garments but your hearts.

Nothing is worthy of worship except God!

Come with hearts that long to worship God,
come as friends of God to experience a mystery far beyond our reach,
but near in tender love.

Nothing is worthy of worship except God!

Come and worship!

Prayers of Approach

We come into your presence, Eternal One, and tremble before your greatness.
We come into your presence, Risen Lord Jesus, and bow before your love.
We come into your presence, O Spirit, and warm ourselves with your radiance.
Be with us, Holy Trinity of Love,
both as we worship and as we journey through Lent,
that as we practice religion with circumspection,
you will lift our spirits, strengthen our faith,
and renew our determination to live as your disciples. Amen.

Introduction

Lent starts, in Western Christianity, today. Around the world Christians pray and gather in church to listen and respond to God's ever living word. Many will receive a mark in ash on their foreheads and be told to "repent and believe in the Gospel" and to remember "you are dust and to dust you shall return." Many Christians use Lent to fast – in the earlier Church the Lenten fast was quite something – so much that Mohammad, learning of it from a friend who was a monk, felt it was too severe and limited Muslim fasting to just 28 days instead of 40 and only for the hours of daylight. Now, of course, folk see Muslim fasting as admirable, if a little hard, and don't expect to see Christians to fast. Lenten observance fell out of fashion amongst Protestants during the Reformation era but in a new age of ecumenical appreciation our liturgical Calendars follow a broader Church Year and, today, we don purple (historically the best and most expensive colour) so we look joyful as we fast. We hear in our readings today patterns of Jewish devotion focused on fasting, prayer and alms giving and hear again Jesus' counter cultural words telling us to be circumspect as we practice our faith.

Prayer for Illumination

Speak to us, O God, as we return to you,
rend our hearts with your uncontainable love,
that as we hear you in ancient and contemporary word,
we may understand, change and follow. Amen.

Readings

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 | Psalm 51: 1 – 9 | St Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

All Age Activity

There are a range of activities suggested here
<https://buildfaith.org/childrens-ash-wednesday/>

Sermon Notes

Orthodox Christians abstain from meat and dairy products in Lent, having limbered up by abstaining from meat for a few weeks beforehand. Catholic Christians try to abstain from meat on Fridays and to fast on Ash Wednesday – if not all of Lent. Whist our traditions reach back beyond the Reformation, Zwingli, an early Reformer and contemporary of Luther, held that abstaining from meat should not be compulsory and refused to condemn friends who tucked into a sausage supper during Lent. Calvin, however, saw fasting as a valuable way to prepare for prayer, to humble oneself and to subdue sin. He thought it was more useful as a communal exercise in times of calamity but should be occasional rather than habitual.

In our reading from Joel, we see a call to fast, pray, and rededicate the nation to God after a series of natural calamities. Of course, then as now, natural disaster brings economic ruin. A crop failure in the ancient world was as devastating as they are now but then they had fewer resources to fall back on. A plague of locusts “like blackness spread on the mountains” would devastate crops leading to the decimation of livestock. Economic ruin and poverty would follow just as it will follow the wild fires in California and rising sea levels around the world. Joel has these dreadful events as “the Day of the Lord” perhaps because he saw God in control, perhaps as something so terrible was beyond normal human vocabulary. The Joel passage sees successive waves of calamity to which the only response can be to turn back to God signified through prayer and fasting. Even in the face of this disaster, though, Joel wants the rending of hearts not clothes; an inner not outer change. There’s no sense of blame of the people for the disasters that have befallen them; unlike many contemporary preachers who blame people for their misfortune, people in the passage aren’t blamed. Fault is not found with minorities who displease self-appointed righteous folk, instead the people are asked to rededicate themselves to God. Joel hoped that if the community united in prayer and fasting God would intervene in the ecological disaster that unfolds. The clergy were told not to condemn but to pray for the people even to the point of tears. The prophet even gave them some liturgical words for their prayers. Joel’s God is gracious and tender, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and who relents from punishing.

Psalm 51 is often one we turn to when needing words to frame repentance. Often thought of (without any real evidence) as David’s prayer of lament after being challenged over his murderous behaviour as a predatory rapist, the Psalm has confession, remorse, owning of mistakes made, and a search for a fresh start with a restored soul nurtured by God’s ever gracious forgiveness. The Psalmist expects forgiveness out of a sense, we hope, of knowing God and not out of a sense of deserving forgiveness.

Today’s Gospel reading gives us a glimpse of Jewish religious practice in Jesus’ day – the giving of alms, prayer, and fasting. Jesus doesn’t suggest these as new or even interesting ideas, but jumps in with directions about how to go about these things circumspectly without drawing attention to one’s piety. In other words, he tried to correct abuses he’d seen but not undermine the practices themselves. Jesus differentiates between public

perception of these acts and God's reception of them – with God being honoured by what is done in private for good's own sake rather than for public glory. Jesus' admonition "Beware of practicing your righteousness before others..." is a bit of a blast against little acts of evangelism we may engage in. In recent years Catholics have been urged go back to small signs of witness like crossing themselves in public, abstaining from meat on Fridays etc. Many churches offer forms of loving service to the wider community due to our faith – foodbanks in the UK owe much to churches after all. Jesus doesn't tell us not to give, pray, or fast but to do so with circumspection and privacy. Giving to the foodbank is fine, processing down the street with the food drawing attention to our generosity isn't! It's quite a counterblast to the religious folk of his time and ours.

Lent gives us a chance to explore what religion is about. As Reformed Christians we may baulk at fasting as it has fallen out of our religious patterns but it may offer us something – Calvin after all saw it as a useful exercise. Prayer, of course is at the heart of our Christian lives and generally in the URC we're not ones for showing off in prayer. Repentance is one to ponder though. Often, we think of repentance as a feeling of sorrow. Being sorry about what we've done is one thing, doing something about it is quite different. Feeling guilty is of little help in a journey of grace, acknowledging our guilt and starting to put things right is a better understanding of the call to repent. All of us, for example, can feel dreadful remorse after offending against someone else and we may seek forgiveness but, of course, seek it without justice. It's easy for the Church to rush to declare forgiveness without giving enough thought to processes of repentance. It's easy to cease on the words of grace in worship without really thinking it through. Whilst declaring God's freely-given grace we forget, sometimes, that this grace was costly. If there's no sorrow, nor a desire to make amends for the wrong we've done then all we're just wanting cheap grace. Abusers, for example, may go to confession or chat to a minister but not wish to go to the police; any assurance of forgiveness without justice is simply empty words. Worse, those empty words might move an abuser away from the imperative to change. Seeking spiritual sustenance whilst ignoring earthly responsibilities is cheap grace. Instead, our sorrow needs to lead to action to change – the real meaning of repentance, after all, is "turn around". It's not about expressing sorrow, or being sorry, it's about change. We may, in our current ecological disasters, be sorry about how we've lived but unless the human race turns away from polluting fuels, despoiling the earth, and misusing nature such sorrow is just cheap grace which will comfort our consciences even as we burn.

Confession and Ashing

We come to you, O God, with a desire to change,
to turn sorrow into action, to fast from selfishness and sin,
to rend the fabric of our comfortable lives, and to turn back to you.

We come to you, O God, with our failures,
our broken hallelujahs, our failed visions,
and the ash of our lives that you may convert us.

We come to you, O God, that you may raise us from ash,
give healing for pain, joy for sorrow, energy for exhaustion,
that we may offer you our lives and our world,
to be transformed by your costly grace.

Silence

Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return; +
turn around and believe the Gospel.

Almighty and merciful God, you hate nothing that you have made,
and forgive the sins of all who are penitent;
create in us new and contrite hearts,
so that when we turn to You and confess our sins
we may receive your full and perfect forgiveness,
and the courage to change, through Jesus Christ, our redeemer, Amen.

*Words of forgiveness adapted from
the Collect for Ash Wednesday in
A New Zealand Prayer Book, Harper One, 1997.*

Intercessions

Gracious God, we bring you the ashes of our world, from Gaza to California,
and we look for time; time to make a change, time to make a difference,
time to turn back to you.

We pray for all who are homeless as their homes have been reduced to ash,
for those who make public policy,
that we may turn away from war on each other and on the earth.

God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Holy God, we bring you all those who feel that their lives have turned to ash,
who taste only bitterness and gall, whose lives seem devoid of meaning and purpose,
and we look for time; time for a wider perspective, time to heal,
time to find meaning, love and purpose, and we pray for all who make public policy,
that investment in health care and social infrastructure may increase.

God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Healing God, we bring you the power of ash to cleanse and heal,
to fertilise and to stimulate rain, knowing that nothing in all creation is despised by you
and we look for time; time to use the resources you give us to adapt to climate change,
time to shelter the poor, time to work for justice,
and time to be agents of change and healing in our world

God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of ash and life, in a moment's silence we bring our prayers to you...

God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

With Jesus we pray, Our Father....

Blessing

May the One who delights not in pomp and show,
the One who craves a humble and contrite heart,
the One who creates a new and right spirit in us,
overturn your love of worldly possessions,
fix your hearts more firmly on God,
that, having nothing, you may yet possess everything,
a treasure stored up for you in heaven.
And the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be with you all, now and evermore, Amen.

*adapted from a Prayer for Illumination
on the Vanderbilt Lectionary site*

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
O Matchless Beauty of Our God	101			
Come Down O Love Divine	294	489	372	89
What Wondrous Love Is This?		395		
Psalm 51		40		
<i>Led By the Spirit of our God</i> by Bob Hurd is excellent, goes to Kingsfold "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" and can be found here It is covered by OneLicence.				
Another metrical version of <i>Psalm 51: 1 – 9</i> can be found in the Free Church of Scotland's book <i>Sing Psalms</i> and found here . The metre is 878777				
<i>We Rise Again From Ashes</i> dates back to 1978 and is very popular in Catholic churches. Rather better words were provided in 2019. Both sets can be found here . The music can be purchased from OCP here .				

RS – Rejoice & Sing | CH4 – Church Hymnary 4 | StF – Singing the Faith | MP – Mission Praise