

Introduction

These resources may also be suitable for use on the first Sunday of Lent. Ash Wednesday services do not seem to be commonplace in the URC. Ash Wednesday is Day 1 of Lent which has 40 days, excluding Sundays. They reflect the '40 days and 40 nights' that Jesus spend in the wilderness. Different Church traditions mark Lent in different ways. Orthodox Christians, for example, take Lent very seriously and abstain from eating animal products. In other traditions, individuals might choose to 'give up' something for Lent. This short clip from the BBC's "Vicar of Dibley" offers a tongue-in-cheek perspective: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7dHc68dodc> For example, someone giving up chocolate for Lent might put aside the money they would otherwise have spent on chocolate and donate that to church funds or to a charitable cause. Sometimes faith leaders have issued exhortations in how to spend Lent. Further details are given below. Some church traditions offer the "imposition of ashes", marking those who wish with an ashen cross on the forehead. Further details are given below, should you wish to consider doing this. At the start of Lent on Ash Wednesday, the Lectionary readings are a call to repentance. They are not an easy read. No matter who we are and how we live our lives, we find this comforting reminder in Romans (3:22-25): "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith."

Call to Worship

The Lord says: 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...
For God is gracious and merciful.

Call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the
aged; gather the children. Return to the Lord...
For God is gracious and merciful.

Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make Your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations. Return to the Lord...
For God is gracious and merciful.

based on Joel 2:12-18

Prayer of Approach

Loving God, at the start of Lent, we come to You as we are.
We know that there are times when things go wrong.
Sometimes it is the small things; and there are the big things.
Yet, we know that we need not fear in coming to You,
because You are merciful and You surround us with Your steadfast love.
As we raise our voices in song, as we hear and respond to Your Word,
remake us in Your image and reflect Jesus in our lives.
Thanks be to You, our Saviour God. Amen.

Prayer of Illumination

Loving God, You spoke through the prophet Isaiah and said:
“Grass withers and flowers fade away,
when the Lord’s breath blows on them,
but the word of our God will stand forever.”
Open our hearts, minds and spirits, we pray. Amen.

Readings

2 Samuel 11:27b-12:7a | *Psalm 51:1-12*

Sermon Notes

The set Psalm for Ash Wednesday is Psalm 51, traditionally ascribed to King David, written at the end of the incident involving Bathsheba. For the accompanying URC digital service, I have approached it by placing the Psalm in the context of the narrative found in 2 Samuel 11 and 12. David abused his power as a man and as a king. One spring day, from the palace roof, David catches sight of Bathsheba taking her post-period ritual bath. He learns she is married to Uriah the Hittite, a soldier away fighting for David in the war with the Ammonites. David sleeps with Bathsheba and she becomes pregnant. David tried to cover it up by recalling Uriah and suggesting he goes home, but Uriah refuses because his men are still away from home fighting in the war. David then conspires to have Uriah killed by ordering that he be placed in the heart of the battle. Following Uriah’s untimely death, David takes Bathsheba into his home as another wife. The prophet Nathan confronts David and God passes a two-fold judgement: firstly, on David’s family; secondly on the child born to Bathsheba and David. The additional reading I have chosen additionally to the Lectionary readings is the key moment in the narrative, the point at which the prophet Nathan confronts David. Nathan uses allegory to uncover David’s wrongdoing. It provides the context for David’s profound words of confession and repentance. Perhaps most significantly is that David must come to a realisation that he has sinned.

Additional Lectionary Readings

The set Gospel reading is Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21. Here Jesus' teaches the importance of charitable giving, but that we should do covertly. Similarly, if we choose the fast or abstain during Lent, that we should do this covertly, too. The set Epistle reading is 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10 Here, Paul urges us to confess our wrongdoing and sin, the motivation behind it is one of restored relationship with our Creator. Paul goes on to remind us that following Christ is not an easy path.

Additional Reading: "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen

This song is much loved and much played, and many are unaware that it is about King David's fall from grace. It holds together a number of strands including David's musical abilities in being able soothe King Saul's troubled spirit, the incident with Bathsheba. There is some cross-over with the Samson-Delilah narrative. However, the overriding theme is that David praised the Lord. Hallelujah = Praise the Lord.

Additional Material

(A) – An allegory about the effects of sin, suitable for all-age worship

You may wish to use this allegory as a starter for a conversation about the things we do and say in life that affect others. This could be widening conversation beyond individual actions and words. For example, what are the cumulative effects of dropping litter? What have been the environmental effects of human activity? Another approach might be to consider reputation through action. Are there certain pupils in your school whose names cause people to groan or scowl? And those whose names make our faces light up with joy? And if you are feeling brave, could you broaden this into world leaders?

Once, there was a young boy. This boy had problems controlling his anger. When he got angry, he would say the first thing that came to mind, even if it affected people. One day, his father gifted him a hammer and a bundle of nails, then said, "Whenever you get mad, hammer a nail into the backyard fence." In the first days, the boy used up half of the nails. Over the next weeks, he used up fewer nails, until his temper was under control. Then, his father asked the young boy to remove a nail for each day he didn't lose his temper. On the day when the boy removed his last nail, his father told him, "You have done good, boy. But, can you see the holes in the wall? The fence is never going to be the same. Likewise, when you say mean things in anger, you'll leave a scar."

(B) – How to create ashes

A brave minister might wish to do this live as part of the service, making sure to do the actually burning outside! If you do not wish to use Palm crosses, you may wish to invite the congregation to write their burdens on a post-it-note-sized piece of paper, and to

burn these instead. The ashes used on Ash Wednesday are traditionally made from last year's Palm crosses. You will need:

- Last year's Palm crosses, maybe a dozen.
- A metal roasting tin or a saucepan large enough for the Palm crosses.
- Methylated spirit (important: do not use any other accelerant!). This is used because it burns very slowly.
- A match
- A few drops of olive oil or similar

Method:

- Put the Palm crosses into the metal tin or saucepan.
- Liberally sprinkle the methylated spirit into the tin/saucepan.
- Go outside into a place sheltered from the wind.
- Light the match and drop it into the tin/saucepan.
- The methylated spirit will burn slowly along with the Palm crosses.
- The contents of the tin/saucepan will be reduced to ash.
- Having waited for them to extinguish themselves and cool down, gather up the ashes onto a saucer.
- Put a very few drops of olive oil (or similar) on the ashes and mix.

(C) – Suggested liturgy for the imposition of ashes

During an Ash Wednesday service, you may wish to invite any in the congregation who wish to come forward and to be marked with an ashen Cross on their forehead. Practical note: use your thumb to mark the Cross on the person's forehead. It is traditional to say these words as the Cross is marked:

<Forename>, remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.

Practical note: Have a wet-wipe to hand to clean your thumb!

(D) – Call to keeping a good Lent by the late Pope Francis (2017)

Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
Fast from worries and have trust in God.
Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.

Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.
Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

(E) – The URC Worship Book

Additional resources for Lent are available here:

<https://urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Lent-to-Pentecost.pdf>

Prayer of Confession

Note: while it is usual for a prayer of confession to follow the prayer of approach and be placed at the start of the service, for Ash Wednesday, it may be preferable to place confession after the exposition of the Word. A musical setting of this available here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdI3F5N_Wdc

Listen for the Word of God in John's First Letter: "If anyone does sin, we have someone who pleads with God on our behalf—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. And Christ is the means by which our sins are forgiven, and not only our sins, but also the sins of everyone."

Silence

Empty, broken, here we stand: touch us with Your healing hand.
Take our arrogance and pride: wash us in Your mercy's tide.

Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us.

When our faith has all but gone: give us the strength to carry on.
When our dreams have turned to dust: in you, O Lord, we put our trust.

Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us.

When our hearts are cold as ice: Your love speaks of sacrifice.
Love that sets the captives free: pour compassion down on us.

Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us.

You are the voice that calms our fears: You are the laughter that dries our tears.
You are our music, our refrain: help us sing Your song again.

Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us.

Humble heart of holiness: kiss us with Your tenderness.
Jesus, faithful friend and true: all we are, we give to You.

Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us.

*based on the song "Empty, Broken, Here I Stand" by Nick and Anita Haigh
© 2000 Break of Day Music and 'The Jesus Prayer' – adapted Walt Johnson*

Assurance of Pardon

Listen for the assurance of pardon, as found in Psalm 103: “As far as the East is from the West, so far does God remove our sins from us.” Hear also the words of Jesus: “Your sins are forgiven.” Jesus also says to us: “Come, follow me.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of Concern

At the bidding, “O Lord, hear our prayer”, please respond with, “**And let our cry go unto You**”. (*Psalm 102:1*)

Loving God, we pray for the brokenness in our world: especially we pray for those whose lives are torn apart by violence, war and disaster. We pray for leaders of governments and business that they might turn from narrow self-interest to global concern. We pray for the victims of crime and abuse. O Lord, hear our prayer...**and let our cry go unto You.**

Loving God, we pray for those who find themselves in desperate situations, not knowing where to turn. We pray for refugees and seekers of asylum. We pray for those in our own communities whose lives are in turmoil. We pray for those who provide support – practically, emotionally and financially. O Lord, hear our prayer...**and let our cry go unto You.**

Loving God, we pray for those whose strength is failing. We pray for those who are unwell, in body, mind or spirit. We pray for all those who work and serve in health and social care. In the silence of our hearts, we name those known to us in need:

Silence

O Lord, hear our prayer...**and let our cry go unto You.**

Loving God, we pray for the church throughout the world, and the church families of which we are apart. We pray for our United Reformed Church: we pray for the unity of the Body of Christ. We give thanks for Your faithfulness which never ends, and especially we pray for those who are taking the first steps in faith, and those who are forced to worship You in secret. O Lord, hear our prayer...**and let our cry go unto You.**

Gracious and merciful God, accept these prayers, for the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ: who is alive and reigns with You – One God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For You are our Creator, our Saviour, and our Giver of Life. Amen.

Blessing

We commit You to the grace of God who welcomes all.
We commit You to the mercy of God –

those who have followed, and those who have failed.
 We commit You to the protection of God – who ever was, and who is,
 and who will always be.
 We commit You to the love of God, our Creator,
 who made us in all our diversity and loves each one of us deeply.
 May the Lord bless you and keep you.
 May the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to You.
 May the Lord lift up the light of His smile upon you and give you peace. Amen.

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Forty Days and Forty Nights		337	236	160
Jesus Lover of My Soul	332	490	355	372
Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing	360		494	
Great God Your Love Has Called Us Here	339	484	499	
Lord You Have Always Been Our Home		54		
Father of Heaven Whose Love Profound		483		827
Your Grace Is Enough				1383
O Lord The Clouds Are Gathering		708		509
Make Me A Channel of Your Peace	629	528	707	456
or Lord Make Us Servants Of Your Peace		527		
Before The Throne of God Above		466		975
O God Be Gracious To Me In Your Love	695	40		
Just As I Am Without One Plea	364	553	556	396
Jesus Remember Me		775	777	
Amazing Grace	92	555	440	31

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