

Why Do We Use Ashes on Ash Wednesday?

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Genesis 3:19



Ashes are placed on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday, in one of the most counter-cultural acts of our faith. It is done for two reasons: a personal act of remembrance and as a sign or a witness for others.

The ashes come from the burnt Palms from last year's Passion Sunday celebration, which begins Holy Week.

So, these ashes bring us back to our last celebration of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus for us. On this first day of Lent, we begin a journey of renewal - from death to life. This is a joyful season. We will make sacrifices, in order to try to let God reform our desiring, but this is a time for God to be generous to us.

When the ashes are placed on our foreheads, the minister says one of two formulas to help us remember who we are and the mission to which we are sent:

"Remember, man/woman, you are dust and to dust you will return."

"Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel."

We are reminded that we are creatures and that our lives were given to us. But, we are also reminded that our lasting home is in eternity, with God. This is not our lasting home.

We are reminded that our call is to turn away from sin and to believe the Good News of our salvation in Jesus. This is a joyful reminder. It challenges us, for sure, but reminds us of why we want to turn from sin.

Finally, we wear our ashes as a sign. It is not a boastful sign through which I say, "Look at me and see how holy I am." No, it is much more like, "I'm willing to wear this sign in the world and say that I've been reminded of where I come from and where I am going. And, I've heard the call to turn away from a life of sin and to give my life to living the Gospel of Jesus." And, occasionally, in this world which is too often caught up in the denial of death, I might be required to answer the question, "What's with the smudge on your forehead?"

Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment. - Joel 2:12-13