

A short service for Ash Wednesday – 17th Feb

On Ash Wednesday part of our usual practice is that as an indication of our repentance we mark each other on the forehead with a sign of the cross in ash. The tradition is that the ash is made from the previous year's palm crosses.

This year we will not be in the church building but we want to continue this tradition. Finding ash in our homes may well be difficult, and the logistics of distributing ash are challenging. Hence we suggest that instead of ash we use soil – the dust of the ground. I am sure you can find some in your garden, or even from a pot plant.

The service allows for each of us to impose ashes on anyone else who is with us or, if we are on our own, on ourselves.

Grace, mercy and peace
from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ
be with you
and also with you.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, since early days Christians have observed with great devotion the time of our Lord's passion and resurrection and prepared for this by a season of penitence and fasting.

By carefully keeping these days, Christians take to heart the call to repentance and the assurance of forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel, and so grow in faith and in devotion to our Lord.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word.

**Holy God,
holy and strong,
holy and immortal,
have mercy upon us.**

The Collect

Let us pray for grace to keep Lent faithfully.

Holy God,
our lives are laid open before you:
rescue us from the chaos of sin
and through the death of your Son
bring us healing and make us whole
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Readings

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—
a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
 a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
 nor will be again after them
in ages to come.

Yet even now, says the Lord,
 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, your God,
 for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
 and relents from punishing.
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
 and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain-offering and a drink-offering
 for the Lord, your God?

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
assemble the aged;
gather the children,
even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her canopy.

Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep.
Let them say, 'Spare your people, O Lord,
and do not make your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
'Where is their God?''

John 11:28-44

Martha went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?' Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you

believed, you would see the glory of God?’ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.’ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’

Reflection – Rev Paul Day

John 11 – The Raising of Lazarus

When I put together the series of midweek reflections on the signs of Christ’s glory from John’s gospel way back at the start of the year it didn’t really occur to me that this one –the raising of Lazarus – would be in the week of Ash Wednesday. And after discovering the clash I have been wondering about what should be done. Somehow the reading didn’t seem quite appropriate for the occasion – should we delay this last sign till later? Should I do a short reflection for today on some other more suitable passage and then talk about this last sign tomorrow?

Finally I decided that the right thing to do would be to carry on and use this reading today. And the reason for doing so is largely down to one verse in the story. It’s that verse often touted as the shortest verse in the bible – *Jesus wept*. Or as it’s translated in the NRSV which we had today *Jesus began to weep*.

It’s a verse that shows the true depth of the humanity of Jesus. It’s a verse that shows the true depth of his divinity. It’s a verse that demonstrates the depth of his love for us and for the world. He is sharing the grief of Mary and Martha and the friends of Lazarus. He shares our grief and our sorrow. He shares the grief and pain of the world. God incarnated as a human being - the Word made flesh – weeps with us and for us.

We can picture God today looking down at our world and weeping. Weeping with those who are suffering from Covid, those separated from loved ones who are ill or dying, those whose family or friends have died. Weeping with

those who are hungry, or homeless. Weeping with those who are abused or persecuted. Weeping with those who are marginalised or forgotten. Weeping at the all the suffering and pain in the world. Weeping at the sin that causes so much of it. Weeping that things are so far short from the perfect world he created.

And so I reached the conclusion that this story of the raising of Lazarus, far from being the wrong story for the start of Lent, is actually an ideal one. It begins with tears. It continues as we shall see with the mourners leading Jesus to the tomb - the place of deepest sorrow. And it finishes with the joy of life from death as Jesus calls Lazarus to come out of the tomb. It ends with a message of hope and transformation. It embraces – as you will recall – that wonderful statement from Jesus – I am the resurrection and the life.

It mirrors the story of Holy Week for which Lent is a preparation. The sorrow and sadness of Jesus' death on the cross. His body being laid in the tomb. The tears of his followers. And then the joy and excitement as he is raised from the dead on the third day. Bringing hope and transformation to the world. I am the resurrection and the life.

And it mirrors too our story. We reflect today on our sin and wrongdoing. On all the things that separate us from God and those around us. On our part in the sin of the world. We recall our mortality – *I am but dust and to dust I will return*. Through the tears we come, if you like, to the tomb. To our place of sorrow. But we are confident of the forgiveness and new life offered through Jesus's death upon the cross and his resurrection. We know that the sorrow and the tears and the pain and the regrets are not the end point. We know that Jesus will call us out of the tomb to a new life, a new beginning and a new hope. He is the resurrection and the life.

And this extends too to the story of the world. A world in which as we know so well there is much pain and abuse and suffering. A world where there are tears of sadness and despair. A world where it seems hope has melted away. But a world that through the death and resurrection of Jesus is offered reconciliation to God – the opportunity to be in true harmony with God - and a hope for a future. He is the resurrection and the life.

In the story of Lazarus what Mary and Martha and the others could see was not the whole picture. In the story of our lives what we can see now is not the whole picture. In the story of the world what is portrayed all around us is not

the whole picture. There is hope. There is a future. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus there is life in all its fullness. He is the resurrection and the life.

Prayers of Penitence

Make our hearts clean, O God; and renew a right spirit within us.

Father eternal, giver of light and grace,
we have sinned against you and against our neighbour, in what we have
thought,
in what we have said and done,
through ignorance, through weakness,
through our own deliberate fault.
We have wounded your love,
and marred your image in us.
We are sorry and ashamed,
and repent of all our sins.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
who died for us,
forgive us all that is past;
and lead us out from darkness
to walk as children of light.

Amen.

The Imposition of Ashes

Dear friends in Christ,
I invite you to receive ashes
as a sign of the spirit of penitence
with which we shall keep this season of Lent.

God our Father,
you create us from the dust of the earth:
grant that these ashes may be for us
a sign of our penitence
and a symbol of our mortality;
for it is by your grace alone

that we receive eternal life
in Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Amen.

*We make the sign of the cross (using soil) on our forehead (if on our own) or
on another's forehead.*

Either these words (if on your own head)

I remember that I am dust, and to dust I will return.

I will turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.

Or these words (if on another's)

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.

The Lord enrich *you* with his grace,
and nourish *you* with his blessing;
the Lord defend *you* in trouble and keep *you* from all evil;
the Lord accept *your* prayers,
and absolve *you* from *your* offences,
for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Saviour.

Amen.

This is love, not that we loved God,
but that he loved us and sent his Son.

He is the sacrifice for our sins,
that we might live through him.

If God loves us so much
we ought to love one another.

If we love one another
God lives in us.

Christ give you grace to grow in holiness,
to deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow him;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.

Amen.