

**Ash Wednesday** marks the beginning of Lent which is a forty day period of spiritual preparation for the highlight of the Christian year – Easter. The name Ash Wednesday derives from the ancient practice of placing an ash cross on our foreheads as a visible sign of repentance during the celebration of Holy Eucharist. Placing ash upon the head as a sign of repentance is an Old Testament tradition: Job 42:3-6, Jer 6:26, Dan 9:3 are but some of many examples.

The ashes used in this liturgy are made from the previous years palm crosses mixed with the sacred oil of catechumens. This oil is used to anoint Baptism candidates at the beginning of their preparation and is used at the beginning to Lent to show that this is a time of spiritual renewal through prayer and self denial. Last years palm crosses are burned to show that the crowd that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem turned into the mob which unjustly condemned him. This is a sign of our rejection of Jesus when we sin. The ashes are blessed and sprinkled with Holy Water as a sign of purification. The sign of the cross is an ancient symbol. The Cross of Christ was the means through which His Resurrection was possible. Through His resurrection the gateway to

eternal life is opened for all who believe but the way to Father and eternal life is through the Cross. By having the ash cross placed on our foreheads we are acknowledging our acceptance of the Cross – our acceptance of the narrow path that leads to glory and also that we are marked with the sign of faith as Christ's own beloved people.

The ashes are imposed with the following words:

*Remember you are but dust and to dust you will return. The words turn away from sin and believe in the Gospel may be added.*

These words are a stark reminder of our mortality and human frailty and need for that profound transformative change of heart, conversion – in Greek – *metanoia* – which literally means a new beginning grounded in repentance.

On Ash Wednesday the church and the priest's and deacon's vestments are purple or an ash coloured grey known as Lent array. Purple is a sign of humility and repentance but also a sign of royalty – Christ 'enthroned' upon the Cross. Purple or

Lent array are worn throughout Lent except on the fourth Sunday, traditionally called Laetare Sunday when rose coloured vestments may be worn.

## **Lent**

Lent is the time of the church year during which we pray for the grace of repentance and focus our prayer and reflection on how we can best change those bad habits and sinful behaviours which are part of our lives. Traditionally people prepared for Lent by making their confession on **Shrove Tuesday** – the word Shrove deriving from the Middle English/Latin word to *shrive* or pronounce absolution. Lent comprises a period of forty days – excluding the six Sundays – during which we remember Jesus' time of privation and temptation in the wilderness which followed his Baptism by John and preceded His public ministry. We also remember forty years during which God tested His people in the desert after their liberation from Egypt. The desert or wilderness can be a bleak place but it is also the place in the bible where God is powerfully encountered. So during Lent we seek to meet the Lord in the wilderness of our sinful nature and seek His

grace and healing for true change of heart and mind as we prepare for Easter. Lent is a time of prayer, fasting and abstinence. **Fasting** is traditional on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. **Abstinence** – the giving up of something we like to eat, drink or do – helps focus our minds and hearts on repentance - so many sins can be related to over-indulgence in some form or other. Some choose to abstain from meat during the Fridays of Lent. Abstinence **must** be accompanied by prayer and reflection –we are fed spiritually as we refrain from over indulgence.

**Almsgiving** – considering the needs of others – is also an important element of our Lenten ‘fast’. The money saved on our favourite food or tippie can well be directed towards people in need.

Liturgically the Gloria is omitted from the Eucharist – except on Maundy Thursday and the word ‘Alleluia’ is not used.

The fifth Sunday of Lent is known as Passion Sunday. Ornaments in the church are covered with purple cloth. This conforms to the traditional Gospel of the day [John 8:46-59] where Jesus hid himself from the people.

**Holy Week** begins with **Palm Sunday**, the last Sunday of Lent. On Palm Sunday, Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem is celebrated. The Eucharist begins outdoors where the palms are blessed and distributed and the palm Gospel is read. The congregation, led by the crucifer carrying the shrouded, palm adorned cross, re-enacts the welcoming of Jesus into Jerusalem by processing around or into the church carrying palms and singing the traditional hymn to Christ the King: *All Glory, Laud and Honour*. The Eucharist then proceeds as usual. The liturgical colour for Palm Sunday is **red** to signify Jesus’ impending martyrdom on Good Friday.

Wednesday of Holy Week is known as ‘Spy Wednesday’ and traditionally the focus is on Judas’ decision to betray Jesus.

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*Tracts for our Times*

*The Church Year:*

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*Ash Wednesday and Lent*