

## ASH WEDNESDAY

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

Not everybody who comes to our Maundy Thursday service wishes to have feet washed. But almost everyone here tonight will receive ashes, I predict. What is it that invites us, or compels us, forward to get the dark marks on our foreheads? Habit? Tradition? A sense of the solemnity of this occasion, and a desire to symbolize that?

In our Lenten discussion group this year we'll be reading a book called **Early Christian Traditions** from the Church's Teaching Series. It's a more mainstream, less provocative book than some we've read, but people seem eager to learn from it. And that eagerness reminds me how little about our own traditions, often, we know, understand, or remember. Including me, as much of what I learned in seminary has gone somewhere underground in my brain.

So I thought I'd talk a bit tonight about ashes, what they might mean, what they may represent. I'm not sure we want to spend this holy season in constant contemplation that we will one day be dust. And the imposition of ashes has a larger significance than simply evidence of our human mortality.

What are ashes? The ashes we use are the product of burnt palms, the palms we receive on Palm Sunday to memorialize Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. If you still have your palms from last year's Palm Sunday, you should go home tonight and burn them – they are supposed to be gone for Lent.

I said on Sunday, talking of the Transfiguration, that it is a bookend story— a light-filled beginning of Jesus' walk toward Jerusalem, his passion and his death. And the Resurrection is the light-filled triumph that ends all that.

Similarly, the burning of the palms starts us on our own journey toward Jerusalem, which we will enter with Jesus on Palm Sunday, waving our new palms. Another set of liturgical bookends, if you will.

The Bible tells us that the first human was formed out of the dust of the earth by God and then God breathed life into that dust. A powerful image. One reminds us that the breath or Spirit of God moves in us, and that without that breath we are like dust, inanimate, aimless, purposeless.

Ashes are, we know, a sign of repentance. In biblical times it was common for people who were mourning to dress in sackcloth and put ashes on their heads. People come to God and sit "in sack cloth and ashes" to show their repentance and to seek God's forgiveness. These ashes tonight are signs that we truly seek to turn, to change, to follow more faithfully in God's path.

In the Biblical stories people probably put the ashes on top of their heads - so why do we, instead of putting these ashes on our heads, put them in the sign of the cross on our foreheads?

When I baptize a baby, or anyone, for that matter, I use oil to mark the forehead with the sign of the cross, and say, *you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever.*

Just so with the ashes—they are a reminder of how we are sealed for Christ. The baptismal anointing, and the cross of ashes, are both reminders

of the mark of the Lamb as it is described in the Revelation of John. The Book of Revelation tells of an angel marking the faithful as a protection before the tribulation.

The mark of the cross is a mark of ownership. These ashes tonight remind us that we are Christ's - that Christ died so that we might live.

We belong to Christ. We have been, in the words of the baptismal service, *buried with Christ in death... we share in Christ's resurrection... we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.*

That is our promise, that is our hope during this holy season. *Amen*

