

## MEDITATION ON ASH WEDNESDAY

Just a little ash that's all it is. And what are ashes? They are the product of burning something away. They are what are left over after fire passes over or through something. They are the waste after the heat and light are gone.

I remember when I was growing up and we had a fire place. It was my job to take the ashes out. They were useless so we would dispose of them as just so much rubbish. Now here I am much older and living once again in home with a fireplace and I find myself doing the same thing I did as child - taking out the ashes and throwing them away.

So why, tonight, do we put this (for lack of a better word) rubbish on our foreheads? Where did this strange tradition come from and what does it mean?

First of all these ashes are a reminder of who we are. The Bible tells us that we came from the dust and to the dust we shall return. The first human was formed out of the dust of the earth by God and then God breathed life into that dust. That is a powerful image. One that is meant to remind us that without the breath or Spirit of God moving in us, we are just like these ashes: lifeless - worthless.

These ashes are also a sign of repentance. Lent is a time of mourning our sins. It is a time when we are called to repent and change our ways. In Bible times it was common for people who were mourning to dress in sackcloth and put ashes on their heads. There are several stories in the Bible where the people come to God and sit before him "in sack cloth and ashes" to show their repentance and to seek his forgiveness. These ashes tonight are meant to be for us symbols of our repentance and signs that we truly seek to follow in God's path.

The people in the Biblical stories 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?

We do so because it is a reminder of how we are sealed for Christ. In most churches when a baby is baptized the minister or priest marks the child with the sign of the cross. This 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 before the tribulation. These faithful would then be protected. The mark of the cross is a mark of ownership. These ashes tonight remind us that we are Christ's - that he died so that we might live.

It is also significant that we use palm branches to make these ashes. The palms are a symbol of victory. By making the ashes from the palms of Palm Sunday we are reminded of how all our victories are but ashes before the glory of God. We are also reminded of the events of Holy Week - and of how the victory of Jesus over sin was won for us on Good Friday.

These may be just a few ashes but they mean a lot. They are a symbol of our need for God. We are nothing but dust and ashes apart from God. They are also a symbol of our repentance and mourning. They are a way of showing on the outside what is happening on the inside. We are truly sorry and sad for the evil and hurtful things we have done. Our trust in our own powers and abilities has tarnished the image of Christ in us.

Perhaps more than at any other time in the Christian year, Ash Wednesday is a call to look inward. This day calls us to a journey inward where we encounter and confront all that which causes separation between ourselves and God. Ash Wednesday calls us to a personal and private journey in the sense that we look deep within at ourselves and not at others. We compare ourselves to Jesus Christ, not to our friends, or neighbors or the thieves and scoundrels who are the real bad guys.

This day and this season of Lent is about a singular, focused question: "How is it between you and me Lord?" Rather than the traditional "*give something up for Lent*" practice, make this season a time to "take something on" for Lent. During the days that lie ahead, take a few moments each day to consciously set aside all the outward noise and demands and quiet the inner chattering of your mind. Then look yourself squarely in the soul and ask... "How is it between you and me Lord?"

This is not an easy thing to do or a light commitment to make. Taking a serious, personal, inventory of our souls is something most of us would rather not do. Indeed there are significant barriers to the process. We are too busy for our inner lives. We are quick to justify ourselves and slow to excuse others. We compare ourselves to those we consider beneath us instead of comparing ourselves to Jesus Christ and the glory of God. And... we are sometimes fearful of what we will see. It will usually take some kind of outer voice or event to turn us to the inward journey. It can be the words of a parent who cares, or friends who dare tell us to take a look at ourselves. Hopefully, for many of us it can be the gentle nudge of the Lenten season.

So as we come today to have the sign of the cross placed on our foreheads may we take time to examine closely our hearts and be prepared to repent of our self reliance and self-seeking. And accept the grace and forgiveness that marks each one of us as a redeemed child of God. AMEN.