

Ash Wednesday Possibilities for the Church



1. Is Ash Wednesday spiritually valuable – or is it an empty ritual?

There is no mention of Ash Wednesday in the Bible, just as there is no mention of Lent, and so many Christians choose to have no connection with this season in the church's year. It is therefore not a commemoration which is expected of Congregational Federation churches. However, as with many matters, this lack of a biblical mandate is not necessarily a reason for dismissing the value of the symbolic traditions which many faithful Christians have valued over the generations.

Jesus' judgement on ostentatious piety and hypocrisy are exactly that. However, his judgements on inappropriate and unacceptable ways of giving to the poor, praying, and fasting in Matthew 6:1-18 are not a condemnation of those three spiritual acts in themselves. Giving to others, praying and fasting are all commendable aspects of discipleship and Christian life.

If we approach the symbolic action of Ash Wednesday with truly contrite hearts and a desire to follow, imaginatively, in the way of Jesus, then the symbolism can be deeply meaningful, challenging and encouraging. We don't wear ashes to make a statement about our piety, but as an acknowledgement that we are sinners, in need of repentance and renewal.

With respect to what follows below, more than one of the particular understandings of the spiritual significance of Ash Wednesday can be combined to constitute a multi-layered challenge and encouragement.

This can be explained in advance to those who wish to participate in this symbolic action, and there can be an appropriate, effective reflection on this at the service when this is done.

Applying ashes can be done as part of a very simple time of gathering, with or without a reflection presented by the leader, and with or without any singing. Or there could be a fuller worship service, built around one or more of the themes identified below.



a) On Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the period of Lent, many Christians acknowledge their mortality and altogether fragile existence. Why might this be appropriate? Because we are remembering Jesus' dangerous, miserable and close-to-starvation experience in the wilderness, and his public ministry undertaken through humiliation and torture to the cross. We want to signal our identification with him, as he identifies with us.

Wearing ashes serves as a stark reminder of human mortality (Genesis 2:7; 3:19; 18:27). They are a reminder that the things of this world are fleeting, and that we are ultimately meant for the kingdom of God.

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b) There is also a biblical tradition of wearing ashes as a sign of sorrow for sins and of repentance. Job repents 'in dust and ashes' (Job 42:5-6). In biblical times, once people admitted their sins, or once their sins were exposed, and they were pleading with God for mercy, they would cover themselves with sackcloth and ashes (Jeremiah 6:26; 25:34; Daniel 9:3; Jonah 3:6).

Ashes serve to say that we are not trying to hide our sinful nature. We know our need of repentance and of God's forgiveness; we know that Jesus' journey to the cross was for our sake and salvation. We are not being ostentatious, but we are acknowledging before one another, the family of God, that we have no desire to pretend who we are not.

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c) There is also another way of understanding the significance of the ash that is applied to the forehead. Some focus on the idea that we are encouraging ourselves – and one another – to return to the Lord with all our heart. This idea of returning to God is an integral aspect of the idea of repentance. We are to leave the old creation in the dust; we are to live as if it were burned up and reduced to ashes, as we move forward with Jesus, as a new creation. The ashes are a sign of a renewed commitment to follow the Lord with all our heart and soul and strength.

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d) What is the significance of the forehead? In the Bible, a name on the forehead signifies that a person belongs to someone. We actually see God's stamp of sovereignty over Israel in the days of Moses, when he tells Moses that the symbols carrying his word to them had to be bound to their hands and their foreheads (Deuteronomy 11:18). When Ezekiel was shown the spiritual desecration of the Temple and Jerusalem, a scribe was commanded to put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieved over all the terrible things that were being done in Jerusalem. Only those with the mark were spared by God (Ezekiel 9:1-6).

In the book of Revelation, an angel delayed destruction until the faithful were marked with a seal on their foreheads (Revelation 7:1-3), this being the Lamb's name and his Father's name (Revelation 14:1). We also read there how 'another beast', opposed to God, will also have his mark put on people's foreheads to signify that they belong to him (Revelation 13:16-18). Finally, we see the vision of God's glorious future for his servants, when his name will be on their foreheads (Revelation 22:4).

This powerful symbol was retained in the early church, and Christians made the sign of the cross with their thumbs on their foreheads, indicating their surrender to the Lordship of Jesus. And to this day, in many churches, the forehead is marked with the sign of the cross, usually simply as a touching of the thumb on the forehead, at baptism.

Therefore, signing the forehead with ashes is another way of expressing that we belong to Jesus, even in the most difficult of circumstances, and even though we are still sinners.

NB Deuteronomy 11:18, referred to above, relates that God's command was for the symbols of his word to be bound to hands as well as foreheads. It is therefore also in keeping with the tradition that those who may not wish to have ashes applied to their faces may have them applied to their hands.

This can all be explained in advance to those who wish to participate in this symbolic action, and there can be an appropriate, effective reflection on this at the service when this is done.



2. Where do we get the ashes?

The ashes used on Ash Wednesday traditionally come from the burning of the palm fronds (or palm crosses) used in the previous year's Palm Sunday celebrations – so keep that in mind on Palm Sunday, if you think you may wish to do this for next year's Ash Wednesday service! The residue from the burning is crushed into a fine powder, an ash, and then applied.

Of course, other ashes can be used.



3. What words are traditionally spoken as the sign of the cross is being made?

Either or both of the following two statements, or some new variation of them, can be said:

'Turn away from sin, and be faithful to the Gospel'. (Mark 1:15)

'Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return'. (Gen 3:19)