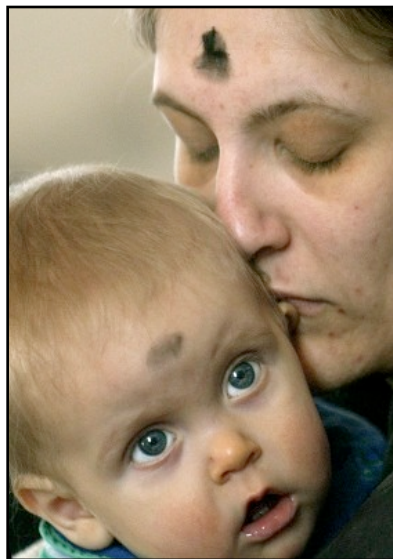


LENT NEWSLETTER

ASH WEDNESDAY SETS THE TONE FOR LENT 2014



How does Ash Wednesday set the tone of the entire Lent?

Tone is something that is very hard to define but you can tell immediately what the tone of the gathering is the moment you step into it. People have serious difficulty trying to put tone into words but they know immediately what is happening. You can feel if you are welcome, wanted or if you are bothersome and the people would rather see you go somewhere else.

The giving of ashes on Ash Wednesday is not some morbid

action from the past. It is a vital sign that calls us to turn, heart, soul and all our energy towards our God.

We have become too comfortable with our own way of doing things. Now we enter into desert space where we can turn towards God and work to become more faithful in living our lives as the disciples of Jesus.

Ashes engage us. Ashes challenge us. Ashes call us to a more intense life with God.

HOW TO USE THIS 2014 BULLETIN

This bulletin has been prepared to help you deepen your understanding and participation in the season of Lent.

Lent must never be just a given. We must not accept that it's here! And then nothing happens.

Each believer must rediscover Lent afresh. Begin this Lent with the eyes of a newcomer.

The most important player during the season of Lent is always our God. These forty days are gifted days to be attentive to God, to hear how God is directing and moving within our lives. This is not always pleasant and enjoyable but it is truly a time of conversion. We seek God because God is seeking us first.

Begin bravely. Choose one discipline (not a whole list of things to be done) and try to stick with it for forty days.

Keep your eyes clearly fixed on the goal: to be an Easter people, filled and living the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

PEOPLE WHO DO NOT NEED A LENT

Many people live their lives like they do not need to practice a Lent. Their words would deny it (they will say, "Oh Yes, we need to have a Lent) but their actions communicate the contrary attitude.

Here are three types of people who do not need Lent this year.

(1) If you are very satisfied with your life with God. You are giving it your very best and you know that you are a pretty good guy! "If I thought something needed changing with God I would do it!"

(2) People who deny their angers, their resentments towards others and their denial of forgiveness to the mistakes and failures of others. "They know they are right, why budge?"

(3) People who are satisfied that their spiritual life, their prayer life and their study of the Scriptures are doing well. They are in good graces with God and the divine is very pleased with them. "No resentments! No regrets at this point in life!"

Living with such a frame of mind allows no room to practice the discipline of Lent.



PEOPLE WHO KNOW THEY NEED TO GET INTO GEAR THIS LENT

You will only become involved in Lent is you are experiencing spiritual needs. If you have no spiritual hungers you will not go looking for any food. After a good meal you never get up to open the fridge door in the kitchen to see what you can graze on. But when you have walked a couple of kilometers in the cold, biting wind and you have not eaten in the last five hours, hunger will push you toward the fridge door. Hunger will push you to open up and see what you can chew on!

Here are three types of people who know they need to practice Lent this year.

(a) My prayer life has grown rather slack. I am so busy with work and rushing the kids from this event to the next event that God has been neglected. "All the time I have for God is one or two moments at the end of the day

and I am exhausted. God just gets the crumbs of my life!"

(b) Within my life there are black patches of resentment against people who are different from me and people who I think are more successful than I am. These resentments just stir up anxiety and sleeplessness in my days. I need healing from the blackness and sinful attitudes within my own life.

© I am working very hard and give almost no time to the concerns of others. The poor are a mere wisp of a cloud in my consciousness. My heart has grown narrow and very tight. I am not very open to the pain of my fellow human beings.

Such feelings and insights move us toward the spiritual practice of Lent. Such people have a spiritual hunger that only God can fulfill.





THE POWER OF ASHES

In the life of every person, family, nation and church there are powerful symbols that carry a wealth of history and experience. We live too much in our brains in Western society and do miss the truths that can only be known through experience, history and story telling. Too often, a human being cannot explain the meaning of an event. Words just fall short.

Human beings share and convey the meaning and purposes within life through the use of symbols. The symbol opens the way to understand in a much deeper manner what the event or the person is all about.

Families will often speak this when they held the wedding ring of their long dead grandmother they would be instantly in touch with her memory, her presence, her cooking and her prayer. When you touch the metal of the ring (often it is a wedding band that has worn thin over the years) you touch the very person of your grandmother. The symbol carries you to her person and her life. Another similar ring is only a metal ring made of gold. It cannot be a symbol.

But your Grandmother's wedding band was worn for decades by your Grandmother. If the ring could talk it would have countless stories to tell.

The religious symbol of ashes is a very dynamic symbol in our faith. To the people with almost no familiarity with Christianity it appears a very odd thing to do. Who would want dirt spread on your forehead?

To the faithful people, ashes bring them into contact with God. All the stories of the believers of the past touch your very body when the ashes touch your forehead. Taking ashes roots us in one of the most important parts of our life with God. God is calling us to come back to him with all our hearts, soul and every ounce of energy.

In the Scriptures there is an expression that repentance, i.e., turning back to God, will happen in sackcloth (very difficult to wear) and ashes. It is a sign that cannot convey any halfway measures. Ashes are not for the lazy or the faint of heart!

The natural meaning of ashes (death and destruction) is a wonderful fit for the spiritual journey of turning towards God. The meaning of physical death means that there is an ongoing spiritual death to all that is sinful, all toxic attitudes and all selfishness.

The ashes received on the outside of our bodies is merely a sign of

the movement on the inside to turn (i.e., die) to all sinful attitudes, practices and actions. This tells us that God has called us. We are taking definite steps to turn to God with all that we are.

The man taking ashes behind you may be moved by the Holy Spirit to let go of all the angers and resentments that bubble up in his life because he was downsized from his managerial position seven and a half years ago. The Holy Spirit is trying to pry out of his soul all these poisonous thoughts and plans to get even with his former employer. Maybe the Holy Spirit is prying these decaying thoughts out of his spirit like you try to pry out the screws out of old lumber. It will quite a struggle because the screws heads no longer functions well.

The giving of the ashes will be done in a communal setting but it is a very personal action. You and I may never know how God is working in the spirit of the next person but the Holy Spirit is working! Ashes are the mere indication of what is going on in the inside.

As you prepare to receive ashes on Ash Wednesday pray and reflect what the ashes will mean for your life? The life of your family? The life of your parish church?



LITANY FOR ASH WEDNESDAY

Eternal God, maker of heaven and earth, have mercy on us.

Incarnate Word, redeemer of the world, have mercy on us.

Abiding Spirit, giver of light and life, have mercy on us.

For turning away from your presence, for disobeying your word and commandments,
forgive us, Lord.

For trusting in our own strength instead of yours, for betraying your trust and the trust of others,
forgive us, Lord.

For resisting your grace and refusing your blessings, for holding back from proclaiming our faith in you,
forgive us, Lord.

For damaging this earth and exploiting its creatures, for neglecting and wasting the gifts you have given us,
forgive us, Lord.

For failing to forgive as we have been forgiven. For judging others and bearing grudges,
forgive us, Lord.

For skimping on our commitments and relationships, for failing in hospitality,
forgive us, Lord.

For tolerating oppression, injustice, and wrong, for keeping silent when we should have spoken up,
forgive us, Lord.

For turning away when others have offered us love, for closing our hearts when others have needed compassion,
forgive us, Lord.

*Remember
you are
dust
and unto
dust
you shall
return*

For all we have done unkindly, unjustly and dishonestly, for our careless speech and hurtful words,
forgive us, Lord.

Most merciful God,
we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed,
and in what we have failed to do:
we have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves;
we repent, and are sorry for all our sins.

Father, forgive us.
Strengthen us to love and obey you in newness of life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

