

THE IMPOSITION OF ASHES

For nearly a thousand years, these words have been spoken to young and old alike as the sign of the cross is traced on their foreheads with ashes – the Imposition of Ashes, as it has come to be known. So “What does this mean?” Where did this rite come from and how can it be used meaningfully in congregations today?

Ashes in the Bible

The Bible contains a number of references to ashes and dust (Joshua 7:6; 1 Samuel 1:2, 15:32; Job 2:12, 16:15; Jeremiah 25:34). In fact, the Lord’s curse on Adam, “dust you are, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19) is echoed in the Imposition of Ashes formula. In the New Testament, Jesus declares: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.” So in the Bible, ashes carry a two-fold meaning: as a sign of human mortality and as a sign of public repentance.

Ashes in Church History

This understanding carried over into the early and medieval church. Tertullian (ca.160-225) describes the use of sackcloth and ashes in the penance of an adulterer before his pastor. Originally, ashes were reserved only for public penitents-i.e. murderers, adulterers and others who had fallen away from the church but desired reconciliation. The beginning of Lent became a primary season of the church year for that to take place. By the 12th century, ashes became associated with the beginning of Lent, thus providing the first day of Lent with its name, Ash Wednesday. By the time of the Reformation, the Imposition was a mainstay of Lenten piety and practice.

Ashes today?

A contemporary appropriation of the Imposition of Ashes should begin with the two-fold biblical understanding of ashes: as a sign of our mortality and as a sign of our repentance. Likewise, the traditional formula, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” is appropriate, since it paraphrases the words of God in the Garden of Eden. By receiving the ashes, the worshipper acknowledges that God’s judgment against our sin is right and just. But the ashes are also made in the sign of the cross – the very instrument by which our Lord took upon himself the punishment for our sin, in our place. Thus, the cross of ashes serves to remind us that we are sinners, and that Christ died for us sinners.

The rite begins the service for Ash Wednesday, with the priest calling the congregation to observe the holy season of Lent: Dear Brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ, on this day the Church begins a holy season of prayerful and penitential reflection. Our attention is especially directed to the holy sufferings and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. From ancient times the season of Lent has been kept as a time of special devotion, self-denial, and humble repentance born of a faithful heart that dwells confidently on His Word and draws from it life and hope...

The congregation might join in praying the ancient Litany, or it may conclude with prayers. When the Litany or prayers conclude, the priest and servers receive ashes first, followed by the congregation. Using the right thumb, the priest places the ashes on the forehead of each person, saying, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

So what happens after you leave Ash Wednesday with those ashes on your forehead? The first thing that happens is that you go out into the world where others will see that cross on your forehead. Your silent witness has been given; you have been marked as one redeemed by Christ crucified. But the other thing that happens is that you will eventually go home and wash those dirty ashes off your face. And doesn’t that water also become a concrete, tactile reminder of the water of your baptism, where your sins were washed away forever? God’s grace abounds!