

Information about: Ash Wednesday



Photo: Maureen Didde

Around February or March, you may see notices on church noticeboards advertising services for Ash Wednesday. But what *is* Ash Wednesday and what happens at an Ash Wednesday service?

Why a Wednesday?

In the western Church Ash Wednesday falls 40 days before Easter Day (not counting Sundays), which is why it is always a Wednesday. The last week begins with Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, which commemorates the events recounted in the gospels about the arrest and trial of Jesus, his crucifixion and death and his resurrection from the dead. These events are at the heart of the Christian faith, so that Easter day, which occurs on the next Sunday after Palm Sunday, is the most important event in the Christian year.

What's Ash Wednesday got to do with Easter?

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of a time of preparation for Easter. This time of preparation is called Lent. The word Lent may come from an old word meaning 'lengthening light', i.e. springtime. You will know if it is Lent if you go into a church in the spring and see that the fabrics, like the cloth which covers the altar, are coloured purple. Lent is called a 'penitential' season, meaning a time when Christians say sorry to God for not living up to God's expectations and penitential seasons are marked by the colour purple.

What's Lent about?

Lent lasts for 40 days because it commemorates the time Jesus spent preparing himself for his ministry of teaching, healing and calling people to follow him as disciples. In three of the four gospels, we are told that Jesus spent 40 days in the desert before he began, praying, fasting and working out what God wanted him to do. You can read about it in Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, and Luke 4:1-13.

What is the ash, anyway?

Ash Wednesday marks the first day of Lent and in many churches there is a special service which sets the tone and purpose of the 40 days. The ash comes from the dried palm leaves which are used in churches, often folded into crosses, on Palm Sunday. Those old palm crosses are burned and it is their ash which is used. Usually the ash is put into a container and mixed with some water or oil to make it less dusty.

What happens with the ash?



Photo by John Carlton

At the special service, everyone in church is invited to come up to the front where the priest, minister or other leader dabs on the ash or makes the sign of the cross with the ash on the forehead of each person. Sometimes people are invited to wash or wipe off the ash before they leave as a sign that they have been forgiven their sins and are ready to make a new start. In other churches, people leave with the ash still on as a sign of their faith to others. Because the ash is mixed with oil or water, it will be sticky and stick to the skin for a while. The ash wears off eventually, but you can also wipe it off if you want to. As the priest or minister makes the mark, they may say 'Remember you are dust and to dust you will return' or 'repent and believe the gospel' or similar words.

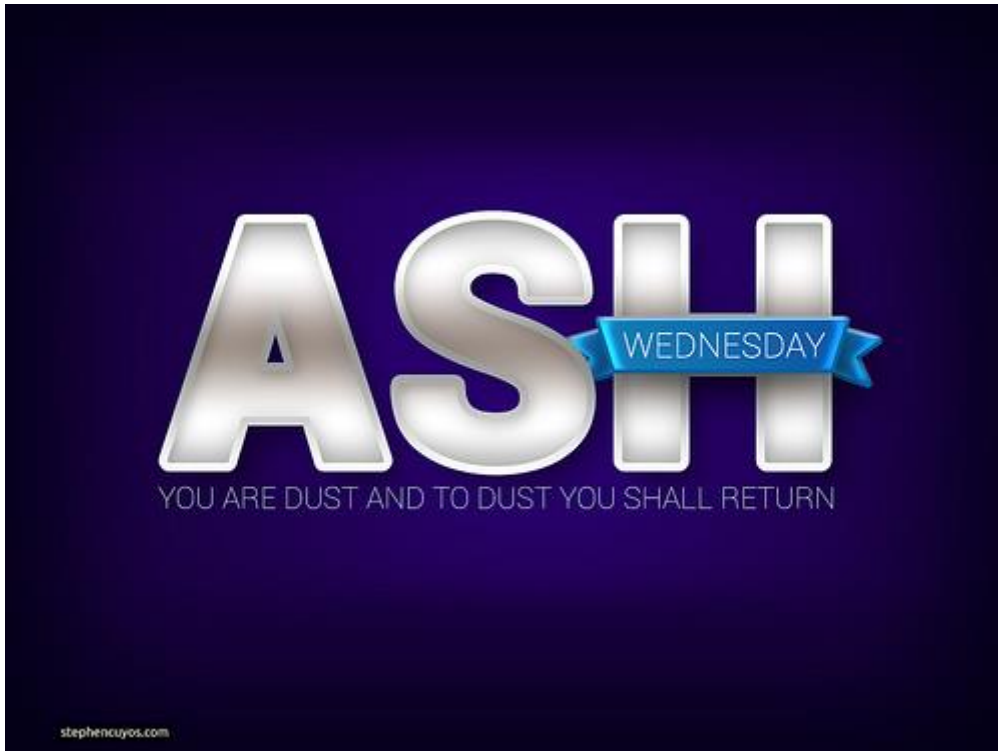


Photo by Fr Stephen, MSC.

What's that all about?

The first sentence comes from the book of Genesis (3.19) in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament of the Bible). It's a reminder of the story about the first humans, Adam and Eve, who were made by God from the dust of the ground. Although they expected to live happily with God for ever in the Garden of Eden, they disobeyed God and had to leave the garden, to live in the world and eventually to die, to go back to the dust of the ground from which they were made. This reminder of human mortality might seem rather morbid, but actually it's to remind us to live our lives to the full, and, it's to prepare us for the resurrection of Jesus at Easter, because in the Christian faith, Jesus overcomes death. But we can't appreciate what that means unless we remind ourselves of the reality that we are all going to die and our bodies turn to dust. The second sentence reminds us that the best way to live our lives to the full is to be good disciples of Jesus and use his teaching to make the world a better place. So this is a good time to renew our determination to be better Christians.

So receiving the ash prepares us spiritually to think about the meaning and purpose of human life and to celebrate the eternal life the resurrected Jesus shows to us at Easter.

What else happens?

The day before Ash Wednesday is traditionally called Shrove Tuesday, which is another kind of preparation day. 'Shrove' comes from the verb 'to shrive' which means to go to confession and receive forgiveness for your sins from a priest. Some Ash Wednesday services incorporate a time of saying sorry to God for falling short and receiving forgiveness for our shortcomings and sins. It was a way of showing that in Lent we can make a new start on our spiritual lives leading up to the joy and celebration of Easter. Because Shrove Tuesday is the day before the start of Lent, people would also use up their leftover food, especially perishable food and fats and in some cultures you see Mardi

Gras (Fat Tuesday) festivals and parties. In the UK Shrove Tuesday is sometimes called Pancake Day from a tradition of using up excess eggs, butter, sugar and flour before Lent starts.

That's because the spiritual preparation of Lent, which starts with Ash Wednesday has always been traditionally been associated with fasting, just as Jesus fasted for his 40 days in the desert. These days you might hear people talk about giving something up for Lent, rather than out-and-out fasting. People quite often give up pleasures such as alcohol or chocolate and some people use the money saved by giving something up to give a donation to charity.

So Ash Wednesday marks a point at which we decide to make a new start on our spiritual lives. It's not all about giving up, going without and being told we're going to die though. It's about new possibilities as people of faith, getting ready to understand and appreciate what God has done through Jesus and what God is still doing today. Without that time of preparation, it will be harder to appreciate the story of Holy Week and the immense joy of Easter.

If you go along to Ash Wednesday service, you might like to think of it as a way of letting you make a new start on your spiritual journey. Here are some questions you might like to have at the back of your mind.

- What do I want to leave behind as I start this new part of my journey?
- Is there anything I want to say sorry for before I go forward?
- What could I give up, or even take on, for Lent?
- What would I most like to do with the life I've been given?
- What does this new start mean for me?