

Why Do We Receive Ashes as Lent Begins?

Kristopher W. Seaman

Many parishes collect palm branches blessed the previous year to make ashes for Ash Wednesday, as envisioned by the Sacramentary (the red book the priest uses during the liturgy). Once the palms are collected, people gather a few days before Ash Wednesday, usually after Evening Prayer, to burn the palm branches.

During the course of a year, the once green, oxygen-producing, living palm branch was cut, blessed, distributed on Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion, and later placed in the home. Subsequently over the year, the branches began to yellow, dry out, and shrink. The cycle begins again: the ashes are burned to produce ash. On Ash Wednesday, they are applied to the forehead in the form of a cross.

A profound movement in people's lives is given expression in the change that occurred to the palm branch over the year. Like that branch, we, too, may lose a firm rootedness in living the mission Christ entrusted to the Church. In general terms, sin is moving away from life in Christ to our own ways. The relationship of Christians to Christ and his Church is begun in Baptism. Christians understand this baptismal relationship as a covenant between God and his people. Every Sunday, we participate in word and Eucharist to renew our ecclesial relationship to the Triune God. While God is always faithful, human beings are not. We can stumble, fall, or even turn our back to God. One of the parables Jesus tells in Luke's account of the Gospel is of the prodigal son. A son of a rich man receives his inheritance from his father. After spending the inheritance, he returns home, ashamed. Jesus' parable states, "But while he [the son] was far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." The father says, "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" (Luke 15:20, 24). Just as was the father in this

parable, so too our God and Father is always waiting for us to turn closer to God. Like ashes, and the son, God invites us to move closer to the life he offers in Jesus the Christ. This is discipleship: living the mission Christ entrusted to the Church.

Ashes are signed with the cross—a symbol of the life of discipleship. Just as the palm branches died, withered, and eventually burned to form the cross on our foreheads, so too we die to self to turn to the ways of Christ that are life-giving.

Ashes are also dust. The Latin word for ash or dust is

humus, and is the same root for humility. To be humble is not to exalt oneself, but another, namely Christ. During the distribution of ashes, one of two phrases may be proclaimed while ashes are signed on foreheads. "Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return." As "dust," we are to be humble by faithfully "putting on Christ" and living the mission Christ entrusted to the Church to which we belong. The other phrase, "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel" is more obvious in its implications. During Lent and throughout our lives, we are constantly called by God to turn to life in Christ through

the power of the Spirit. The second chapter of the book of Joel states, "Come back to the Lord with all your heart; leave the past in ashes, and turn to God with tears and fasting, for he is slow to anger and ready to forgive" (cited from the Sacramentary, p. 77). Though we may squander the gifts God constantly gives to us, ashes express our need to turn to the God of mercy, compassion, and peace.



KRISTOPHER W. SEAMAN is the associate director for the Office for Divine Worship in the diocese of Gary.