

Returning

Gathering

*Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle.
This week, it would be appropriate to find a **purple cloth** or scarf to signify that we are moving into a time of preparation..
Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.*

Gathering

Welcome!

Welcome to the sacred time.

Welcome to this sacred space.

Light Candle

We light a candle to centre us and to draw us towards Christ.

The writer of the gospel attributed to John assures us:

Jesus spoke to them, saying,
"I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

John 8:12

Acknowledgement of Country

As we gather in this place on this sacred evening,
we give thanks for the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation.

They too have gathered, since time immemorial, to mark sacred moments and to tell sacred stories.

We give thanks for their stewardship of this land and its waters,
we pay our respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

And we continue to pray for and commit ourselves to working towards a shared future that reflects the way of Christ for all peoples.

Call to Worship

The prophet Joel cries out:

Blow the trumpet in Zion;

sound the alarm on my holy mountain!

Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,

for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—

² a day of darkness and gloom,

a day of clouds and thick darkness!

Like blackness spread upon the mountains

a great and powerful army comes;

their like has never been from of old,



nor will be again after them
in ages to come.

In the silence of this evening,
in the quiet of the day,
in the peace of this place we come
with dust and ashes from which we came
and will return.

Spill The beans, Issue 42, Resources for Ash Wednesday, p.10

And so we pause for breath.

*Breathe deeply - breathing in the peace and grace of God;
resting in God's embrace as you breathe out.*
[twice]

Prayer - Gathering

As we come in from the cool of the evening,
[from the dampness of the day],
from the busyness of our living,
from the worries of our time
(worries of war, worries for friends and family caught in flooding),
Loving God,
slow us down,
embrace us in your love,
turn us once more towards your way.
Spirit of Life, move amongst us,
restore, nourish and renew us as we commit ourselves once more to the way of Jesus, the
way of the cross. Amen.

Sing - God of Day and God of Darkness (AOV1-56)

1. God of day and God of darkness,
now we stand before the night;
as the shadows stretch and deepen,
come and make our darkness bright.
All creation still is groaning
for the dawning of your might,
when the Sun of peace and justice
fills the earth with radiant light.

2. Still the nations curse the darkness,
still the rich oppress the poor;
still the earth is bruised and broken
by the ones who still want more.
Come and wake us from our sleeping,
so our hearts cannot ignore,
all your people lost and broken,
all your children at our door.

3. Show us Christ in one another,
make us servants strong and true;
give us all your love of justice,
so we do what you would do.
Let us call all people holy,
let us pledge our lives anew,
make us one with all the lowly,
let us all be one in you.

4. You shall be the path that guides us,
you the light that in us burns;
shining deep within all people,
yours the love that we must learn,
for our hearts shall wander restless
'til they safe to you return;
finding you in one another,
we shall all your face discern.

5. Gentle Father, Loving Mother,
Jesus: Brother, Saviour, Friend;
Spirit of all grace and power,
may we praise you without end.
Grant us all a peaceful resting,
let each mind and body mend,
so we rise refreshed tomorrow,
hearts renewed to kingdom tend.

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Introduction to Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the 40 days of Lent - well, 40 days plus Sundays. From the of earliest times, the church used this time as a time of preparation - for preparing disciples who would be baptised on Easter Day, for preparing disciples who may have gone astray and perhaps had even been excommunicated - thankfully we don't do that any more! From the earliest of times, it was considered a time for prayer and fasting - echoing the time Jesus spent in the wilderness before he began his public ministry (more about that on Sunday).

The readings tonight speak to us about what fasting and prayer look like - what are we trying to achieve? what does God really want from us?

Reading: Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

² Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that practised righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;

they ask of me righteous judgements,
they delight to draw near to God.

³ 'Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?'

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,
and oppress all your workers.

⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵ Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.
9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
10 if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
11 The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

For the Word of God in Scripture,
for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God!

Prayer - Confession

Invite people to hold their palm crosses

Ever-faithful God,

we hear the words of the prophet Isaiah and we wonder...

- is our discipleship more of a show than a wholehearted commitment to your way?
- do we take workers for granted?
- are we part of a system that allows people to be paid less than their efforts deserve, or less than is enough to feed and home their families?
- do we quarrel or fight or resort to violence we don't get our own way?
- are we doing all we can to ensure that each one of your precious children is fed, housed, clothed, and given every opportunity that our own children have had?
- do we speak up for justice?

God, these crosses have witnessed our praying and our reading and our living throughout this past year. Some days we feel like we have done OK, and other days we know we have not got it right. Here and now, we offer it all to you - the good parts and the parts we would now rather forget.

Forgive us.

As we offer these crosses, may we know that we are loved, forgiven and free to return to you and to try again...

Response - bring palm crosses

*Throughout the year, we have prayed with these crosses;
we have held them or carried them as we have gone about our lives this past year.
It is time to let go of what has been.
As we sing, we place our palm crosses in the bowl.*

Sing - Create In Me A Clean Heart (P&W434)

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
(repeat)

Cast me not away from your presence, O God,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore unto me the joy of your salvation,
and renew a right spirit within me.

Barrie Gott

[Light the crosses and let them burn]

Assurance

The prophet Joel again:

¹² Yet even now, says the Lord,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the Lord, your God,
for [God] is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.

As the crosses turn to ashes, we leave behind what is past,
and we turn again to the God who waits for us,
the God who embraces us,
the God who loves us into being all that we were created to be.

Listening for God's Voice

Reading: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² 'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell

you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁶ 'And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁹ 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

For the Word of God in Scripture,
for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God!

Reflection

Ash Wednesday - already?!

It creeps up on us with a degree of stealth...

Perhaps that's because our attention has well and truly been elsewhere these past weeks - as it rightly should be.

Between watching, waiting, worrying and praying about the unfolding situation in Ukraine and the flooding in Queensland and northern NSW, and now the developing rain here - well, it is no wonder that our minds and hearts have been fully occupied.

The question Ash Wednesday poses for us is - do we have the focus right?

How do we pray when a world leader seems to have gone on a power-hungry rampage?

How do we pray when we see the impact of that power on everyday people in the Ukraine, like you and me who are just going about their lives?

How do we pray when the waters coming down the river are more than we have ever seen before and people are forced to flee from the rooftops?

How do we pray as it keeps on raining? We joke about Noah, but goodness!

How do we pray when we are helpless in the face of human abuse of power and the power of nature?

Ash Wednesday holds the reality of ash - that sometimes it feels like everything has been lost, completely destroyed.

But it also holds before us the promise, the hope, that from the ashes, new life will emerge. And that mostly, that emerging of new life takes time, it takes nurturing, it takes a commitment to doing things a bit differently - these are all themes we explore over the next few weeks.

So the readings today invite us to take stock - of the way we are living, of how we are living out our discipleship in the world.

Perhaps a question to ask ourselves is how does the world see the life of Jesus in me?

How does the world see God's love in me?

And if there are changes to make - maybe it is giving up a bad habit, but more often it is likely to be nurturing a new habit of prayer, of fasting, perhaps, or perhaps it is about

nurturing an intentional focus on the way of Jesus and how we live that out in a world that knows too well the reality of ash.

Whatever it is for you, may we be people who not only acknowledge the reality of ash and dust, but the hope that is in God's promise to bring new life out of the dust and ashes.

Responding

Listen - Beautiful Things (video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyPBtExE4W0>

Invitation

*As we turn once more, intentionally, towards the Creator of All That Is,
we mark ourselves with the remnant of what is past, looking to the future with hope and renewed commitment to the way of Christ Jesus.*

The ashes invite us to return to God - and to enter deeply into a conversation with God's spirit calling us to an ever-closer relationship and an all-embracing life of following Jesus of living in ways that reflect his love in the world.

BLESSING THE DUST

All those days
you felt like dust,
like dirt,
as if all you had to do
was turn your face
toward the wind
and be scattered
to the four corners

or swept away
by the smallest breath
as insubstantial -

did you not know
what the Holy One
can do with dust?

This is the day
we freely say
we are scorched.

This is the hour
we are marked
by what has made it
through the burning.

This is the moment
we ask for the blessing
that lives within
the ancient ashes,
that makes its home
inside the soil of
this sacred earth.

So let us be marked
not for sorrow.
And let us be marked
not for shame.
Let us be marked
not for false humility
or for thinking
we are less
than we are

but for claiming
what God can do
within the dust,
within the dirt,
within the stuff
of which the world
is made
and the stars that blaze
in our bones
and the galaxies that spiral
inside the smudge
we bear.

*Jan Richardson
from Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*

*Come and collect the ash - you can share with your household or someone you feel confident sharing with, or you can take one for yourself.
Mark yourself, or each other with the sign of the cross - either on your forehead or on the back of your hand. You might want to offer each other the encouragement on the screen:*

Return to God with all your heart,
and leave the past in ashes.

Listen - With These Ashes

With these ashes, we remember,
what we're made of , what we're made of.
With these ashes, we remember
we are made of dust

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,
so it has always been.
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,
we return again.

Kathy Douglass

Prayer - for ourselves, for the world

We sit here tonight, marked with the ash of our last year's journey.
We are still uncertain of what the pandemic will bring this year.
We are tired of living somewhere between lockdown and the freedom to do what we want,
when we want to.

We think of people tonight who sit in other kinds of ashes:
the ashes of their homes, blown apart by the bombs of war;
the ashes of homes and livelihoods destroyed by flood waters;
the ashes of broken relationships, torn apart by the displacement of war, violence in the home, egos and life choices that just can't seem to be reconciled;
the ashes of hope, threatened by illness of body, mind or spirit.

God of new life, here in Australia we know the life that can emerge from the ashes of even the most terrible of bush fires. So we pray tonight that new life will emerge from the ashes in all the places of struggle we have named.

As we begin our preparations for Easter, we know that the life of Christ is always with us. As we engage once more with Jesus' journey to the cross and beyond, may we bring life and hope into the world we encounter. Amen.

Sending

Sing - When I Survey The Wondrous Cross (TIS 342)

A familiar hymn that takes our gaze towards the cross and the boundless love of God and names the commitment we make to following the Jesus way.

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of Glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

See from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down;
did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
save in the death of Christ my God;
all the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small:
love so amazing, so divine
demands my soul, my life, my all.

Isaac Watts

Poem

May the dust of the Saviour's stories
mark us for this journey.

May the dust of the roads he travelled
guide us on this lenten path.

May even the dust of the words of love
be enough to hold us through this darkness.

And in such dust,
where footsteps are left,
may we place our sins
and our shadows,
our hurts
and our alleluias
folded away
until the dawn of life.

May the dust from the cross call us
and leave footprints on the way.

Benediction

In the silence of this evening,
in the quiet of the day,
in the peace of this place
we now go
with dust and ashes:
forgiven and renewed;
forgiven and loved again;
forgiven and companions on the way.

Spill The Beans, Issue 42, Resources for Ash Wednesday, p.12

Blessing

After the blessing, if you would like to stay in this space for a little longer, feel free to do so - and so I would ask others to move to the foyer if you need to chat...

May the God of ashes and new life, draw new shoots of life from your weariness.

May the Living Christ shine on your path and show you the way.

May the Spirit of Life give you energy and courage for all that you will encounter on your discipleship adventures. Amen.

Rev Kath Merrifield
2 March 2022