



Ash Wednesday **Create In Me A Clean Heart, O God**

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** or **black** cloth or scarf because tonight we begin our journey towards Easter in a time of preparation called Lent.*

If you have one, you might also want to have your palm cross from last year's Palm Sunday service with you.

Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.



Introduction to Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday begins our preparations for the great celebration of Easter.

It marks the beginning of the 40 days (plus Sundays) of Lent. From the earliest days of the church this has been set aside for a time of reflection - both individually and communally - of who we are and who God calls us to be, a re-setting, if you like, of our spiritual compass.

We enter the Season of Lent reflecting on personal and communal frailty and faults, and we acknowledge our flaws and our dependence on God's overwhelming compassion. As we gather, we remember that we are frail, that we are creatures, and that we live in interdependence with all living things. We remember that we are made of dust. But we are dust formed by God, enlivened by God's breath, and called to share in God's journey. In remembering our frailty, we remember how deeply we are loved.

Light Candle

We light this candle...

Light the candle

And we breathe...

and we turn towards the one who is the Light of the World, Jesus the Christ.

We seek the light.

We celebrate the light.

We allow ourselves to be drawn to the light.

We wonder at what the light reveals to us.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Ancient of Days, God our Creator, breathed life into this land and its peoples.

The land we gather on,

the land we live, work, play and worship on,

has been cared for since time immemorial by the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal Nation. It has never been ceded.

We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

We commit ourselves to building relationships with those who carry the sacred stories today.

And we commit ourselves to pursuing justice for their communities, so that our reconciled life reflects the way of God here in this place.

Call to Worship

Remember!

We remember that we are dust.

Remember!

We remember that we are creatures.

Remember!

We remember that we are frail.

Yes, you are dust.

You are creatures.

You are frail.

But remember more. Remember!

We remember that we are loved by God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Creator God,

In the beginning, you made all things.

You formed human creatures out of the dust.

You breathed life into us.

Teach us to remember your creative love.

Teach us to remember our place alongside all created things.

As we acknowledge our frailty, may we turn our lives to follow in Christ's ways, through the power of your Spirit of grace.

Amen.

Sing - How Long (NCYC 2003) [2 July 23]

How long must we cry out

'Till justice rolls down like a river?

How long will this night last

And when will we all be together?

And bodies get twisted and broken?

How long will these voices

Keep shouting loud insult and slogan?

Teach me to do what is right...

Teach me to do what is right -

work in the darkness, trust in the light,

and may love be the path I walk upon.

How long ? Will your creatures

Be trampled degraded forever?

How long, must we cry out

'Till justice rolls down like a river?

Teach me to do what is right...

How long will these bombs fall

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Prayer of Confession - Based on Isaiah 58:1-9

Take your palm cross in your hand.

This cross has accompanied us throughout the past year - perhaps it sat in your Bible or prayer journal, a witness to your conversations with God. Perhaps it sat in your wallet or handbag, a witness to your daily comings and goings. Perhaps it sat in your study or on your bedside table, a witness to your work or rest. Perhaps it had to be dug out of wherever it rested when you came home from the Palm Sunday service last year, a

witness to the struggle for many of us to keep the life and light of Christ front and centre of our busy lives.

Hold it now as we listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah...

Through the prophet Isaiah, God says:

'Shout out; do not hold back!

Announce to my people their rebellion!

Through the prophet Isaiah, God says:

'the people fast, but for their own benefit;

the people call on God, but for their own profit.'

And what of us?

[A pause for silence]

Through the prophet Isaiah, God says:

'Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to let the oppressed go free?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry

and bring the homeless poor into your house?'

And what of us?

[A pause for silence]

When you seek justice, then, says God:

*'Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly.*

*Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and God will say, "Here I am."*

And what of us?

[A pause for silence]

Make our ways just, O God.

Turn our hearts towards you.

Even in our frailty, may our lives shine forth your love.

Amen.

Ashes

As we acknowledge who we are before God, so we commit ourselves to the task of reorienting our lives to the life shown to us in Jesus Christ.

We turn once more to God.

As we do, you might like to bring forward your palm cross and place it in the tray - leaving the struggles and frailties of the past year there in the tray.

Light the flame - as the words of grace are spoken...

Words of Grace

May we hear in the words of Isaiah

the possibility and promise of what could be

of how all might flourish

when we live with God's justice, compassion, and grace.

Then,
*'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.
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.'* ~ Isaiah 58:11–12

May you hold this vision of renewal before you,
for in Christ, we are forgiven.
Thanks be to God. Amen.

Listening for God's Voice

Reading: Psalm 51

To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
- 3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
- 4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgement.
- 5 Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- 6 You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
- 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
- 11 Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
- 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
- 14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
- 15 O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- 16 For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.
- 17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
- 18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
- 19 then you will delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt-offerings and whole burnt-offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

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

Psalm 51 is well known. Many congregations sing it often as a way to acknowledge 'sin,' to call upon God's gracious forgivingness, and to commit to walk in God's ways. On Ash Wednesday, this psalm reminds us of our human frailty and fragility. It points to how we do not always live as we would like, in alignment with God's desire that all people and the whole earth might flourish.

The context of this psalm is given in the superscript.

"To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba."

It is attributed to David, King of the Israelites, after he acted ruthlessly and selfishly. Remember the story of David, Uriah, and Bathsheba recounted in 2 Samuel 11-12. David desires to possess Bathsheba, so he arranges for her husband, Uriah, to be placed at the front of battle so that he will surely be killed. With Uriah out of the picture, David was free to take Bathsheba to be one of his wives (and take is the correct word here, for there is no sense that Bathsheba offers consent).

But then David is confronted about his actions by the prophet Nathan. Tragically, the story tells that Bathsheba's child dies, a circumstance that the writer attributes to God's judgement. (Like many, you may find this attribution difficult).

This psalm is a deep personal lament. The emotion expressed is heart-rending. Ultimately, the psalmist understands God's character as trustworthy, full of loving kindness and tender mercies. The psalmist declares that they have acted in a way they wish they had not and caused harm. Yet there is an opportunity for a fresh start, with a clean heart and a desire to follow in God's ways.

Can you identify with the psalmist here?

The psalm does talk a lot about “sin”.

It is a topic, many of us are not comfortable with.

In some Christian communities, the concept of sin has been abused - used to control and demean. In response to that, the risk is that perhaps don't give it enough attention.

As Janice said on Sunday - the forgiveness of sin is one of three themes that stretch across the sweep of the Bible. The other themes being about freedom from slavery and about belonging and return from exile. All three are held together across the Hebrew Scriptures, the gospels and the writings of the new testament.

So what does “sin” mean to you?

Put simply, sin is what separates us from God.

That might be something we do wrong - like stealing or using violence, a harsh word.

It might be something we fail to do - like walking past someone needing help, not speaking up when we see injustice or someone needing support.

And it can also be much more subtle - like the way we get so caught up in ourselves, we don't spend time in prayer or conversation with God, when we convince ourselves that we are not needed in the pursuit of justice, when we don't take care of this human wonder that is our body, mind and soul.

And yet, God's invitation to “return”, to be free, to know ourselves forgiven is constant and assured.

The psalmist expresses a deep remorse.

And the psalmist speaks of a desire for a “clean heart” and a “right” or “steadfast” spirit.

What do you think that looks or feels like?

Let's try some imagining...

What are some of the things that you love about being a human being?

Perhaps you love to swim in the ocean, or have a picnic in the bush, or to sing with other people in choir or at church. What is it that makes you feel alive in your body and heart?

[pause]

And what are some of the things that are limitations for you? For example, perhaps you want to fly like the birds in the sky, not in an aeroplane, but flying by yourself, but you can't because people don't have wings like birds. Or perhaps there was something you used to do that has become more difficult as you have aged. Or perhaps you see other people doing something that is, at least for now, beyond your grasp. What are the limitations you experience in being human?

[pause]

There's a tradition on this day for those who follow after Jesus to remember our frailty.

We can remember all the wonderful experiences of being human, of being in these wonderful bodies in this wonderful world that God created.

We also remember our limitations; the ways people don't always live kindly or gently.

We remember those things that we have thought about earlier - those things that separate us from God, the roads we have taken that were detours taking us away from the path Jesus showed us.

And so we remember our dependence upon God and our connection to all the plants, and animals and creatures of earth, and even our connection to the planets, stars and universe - to all of creation.

In a moment, we will have the opportunity to receive ash on our forehead or hand as we remember these things.

Who are we as human creatures in this world?

What does it mean to acknowledge our frailties, and our brokenness?

And how do we hold our yearning for a clean heart and a steadfast spirit?

What will this symbol of being human creatures, made of dust, loved by God, what will this symbol of ash mean to you?

Responding

Sing - Create In Me A Clean Heart (P&W 434)

During the song - pound the burned crosses into ash...

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.

Barry Gott
© Genesis Music 1980

Imposition of Ashes

Just yesterday it seems, the palms were fresh and green,
held tight in hands as we remembered Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.
But then they dried, shrivelled, became almost too fragile to touch,
until we burned them into the ashes tonight.

Yet, by the grace of our God,
with the Spirit resting upon them,
they are mixed with oil and placed on our heads or hands,
the dust of life resting upon us
as a sign that by sharing the gifts
of peace, reconciliation, justice and generosity,
we will live into the people we long to become.

As we are touched with this mark,
God of all moments,
remind us that just as you shaped humanity from earth's dust,
so, from the ashes of repentance and denial,
that grace which is gifted to us through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer,
will shape us into faithful followers.

Thom Shuman, *The Dust of Life*, p.5

Let us pray...

Blessed are you, God of all creation.

You created all that we see and so much more that we have yet to comprehend
You created each one of us.
It is written that we are formed from the dust of the earth,
the matter of star-dust – the ash of the Big Bang and the creation of the Universe.
As we receive these ashes, may they be a sign for us;
an opening of a time of reflection upon who we are
and how we live;
At the start of a journey towards Easter
Breathe into us again the breath of life.
Blessed be God for ever. Amen

Adapted from a prayer by Rev Jon Humphries

Let us receive the sign of the cross in ashes.
This symbol reminds us that we are creatures formed from dust who live in
interdependence with all that God has made.
You are invited to come and receive the ashes in the sign of the cross on your forehead or
your hand. Please indicate where you wish to receive this symbol.

Listen - With These Ashes

*Turn to God with all your heart and leave the past in ashes.
Remember that you are born from dust.
Remember that God breathes life in you.*

Prayer for Others

Hear our prayers, God of grace, for clean hearts and steadfast spirits.
We pray that you would meet us here and now.
We pray that we might turn our lives towards your ways.

Teach us to love you.
Teach us to love our neighbours.
Teach us to live towards justice, peace, and the flourishing of all things.

We commit to putting aside our arrogance and greed.
We commit to living gently, remembering that we are made from dust.
We commit to work for a more just settlement for Indigenous peoples.

*In the silence we name the people and circumstances of our world where your light and
love are most desperately needed...*

We pray in the name of the Christ whom we follow,
even towards Jerusalem,
even towards his cross.
We pray in the name of the Christ who did not put love aside. Amen.

Sending

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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Sending

Remember!

We remember that we are dust.

Remember!

We remember that we are creatures.

Remember!

We remember that we are frail.

Yes, you are dust.

You are creatures.

You are frail.

But remember more.

Remember!

We remember that we are loved by God.

Go then and live in love.

We go giving thanks to God.

Blessing

And the blessing of God - divine Creator, divine Word, divine Presence, will be with you -
always. Amen.

*Liturgy adapted from Rev Dr Bec Lindsay, writing for Mediacom L3, Ash Wednesday 2024.
The Dust of Life, Thom M Shuman, Wild Goose Publications*

Rev Kath Merrifield
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