

Ask Fr. James

The things to know about Ash Wednesday and the Lenten Season

Ash Wednesday is on 14th February and it marks the beginning of Lent. (Remember that Ash Wednesday this year trumps "Lover Day.") The Ash Wednesday readings include Joel 2:12-18; 2 Cor. 5:20 -6:2; and Mt. 6:1-6, 16-18 calling all of us to be reconciled to God. The priest and assisting ministers imposes ashes on our foreheads saying; "Remember you are dust and to dust you will return" or "Repent, turn away from sin and follow the gospel."

Here are three things to know about Ash Wednesday.

1. It marks first day of the 40 days of Lent, a roughly six-week period (not including Sundays) dedicated to reflection, prayer and fasting in preparation for Easter. It ends on Holy Thursday, the fifth day of Holy Week.
2. The ashes placed on our foreheads are obtained from the burning of the palms of the previous Palm Sunday. The ashes are typically mixed with Holy Water or oil.
3. The ashes, applied in the shape of a cross, are a symbol of penance, mourning and mortality. Centuries ago, participants used to sprinkle themselves with ashes and repent much more publicly. Today, there aren't any particular rules about how long the ashes should be worn, but most people wear them throughout the day as a public expression of their faith and penance.

Lent is the 40 days period when Christians remember the time Jesus spent praying and fasting in the wilderness before beginning his public ministry. Ash Wednesday kicks off the first day of Lent and signals the approach of Easter. These forty days will also act as a kind of "spiritual spring clean" for us. As such, we shall have a parish celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation on March 12 at 7.00PM.

Ash Wednesday is not a Holy Day of Obligation but it is a day of holy obligation; in other words, we are required to observe this day as a Day of Prayer, Fasting and Abstinence and the attendance of Mass on this day is to offer gestures of repentance for our sins. Anyone between the ages of eighteen and fifty-nine is asked to fast on this day and in addition, those between the ages of fourteen and older are asked to abstain from eating meat on Ash Wednesday and the faithful are urged to use the period of Lent, to increase their efforts in prayer, self-denial, and works of mercy.

The whole idea is not about losing pounds or shedding weights but to 'give things up for Lent,' to take part in special prayer and study groups to learn more about the faith and what Jesus Christ has done for us. We are encouraged to practice abstinence during Lent by not engaging in certain habits (fights, arguments, gossips, etc) and to abstain from eating some type of food and set aside extra time for prayer, peacemaking and study God's word in the Bible. Plan to attend the Stations of the Cross and also pick up reading materials in the foyer that may be of help us to a fruitful Lenten period.

You may email/send your faith questions to Fr. James and he will answer them in our Sunday Bulletins.