

## **Ash Wednesday**

*March 5, 2025*

I don't like thinking about death. I'm guessing you don't either. As a younger person I almost never thought about it. But as the years go by, as I approach the inevitable, I think about it a lot more.

For some of us, the realization that we are truly going to die someday comes gradually. For others, this realization comes like a bolt of lightning after a scary test result delivered by a doctor. It would be nice not to even be aware that death is on the horizon at all, and go through life without a clue that our time on this earth is finite.

Today, of course, we start Lent, a holy time of reflection and prayer and sacrifice. And the sign that most signifies this season (for the vast majority of us) is ashes. We're going to come forward in a few minutes and have them smeared across our foreheads, something we never, ever experience on any other day.

And through this action the Church is reminding you and me of the one thing we never want to be reminded of, the one thing we would avoid at all costs (if we could), that we are going to die. Not a few of us, but every single one of us. Who wants to be reminded of that?

And in case we didn't exactly know what ashes signified, the Church many of us grew up in always used the same words to make the message crystal-clear:

**Remember that you are dust and  
unto dust you shall return.**

As you well know, ministers of the ashes are now also permitted to substitute a different formula:

**Turn away from sin  
and be faithful to the Gospel.**

That sounds a lot better, doesn't it? It sounds more like a spiritual pep-talk instead of a pronouncement of our inevitable death. Why are the two formulas so different?

Who said they are?

Despite our common aversion to thinking about death, it is actually a blessing, a gift, a help to us as we journey through this life. And the reason is simple, we in faith believe that there is so much more to life than just what we can see, more to life than just the struggles and competitiveness and crosses we are asked to carry.

There is the short time we are on this earth, and there is eternity, something that is fleeting and something that never ends, something that will always leave us unfulfilled and something (or more correctly, someone) who never disappoints.

And so, ashes remind us to see a bigger picture, to realize that pursuing things selfishly in this world is pointless and will never satisfy us in the way we want. And it will all pass away someday, all become meaningless and of little value in the face of the death that looms before us.

Remembering that we will die someday then becomes sort of liberating, freeing us from the relentless pursuit of our own satisfaction, our own wants and needs, allowing us to live more fully for others. This other-centeredness is a powerful sign of a genuine life in God, a life that begins on this earth and (through the grace of God) continues on into eternity.

That is the "repenting and believing in the Gospel" we are encouraged to embrace, the re-orienting of our lives in the direction of the things that last, the things that matter, the things that lead us into the tender arms of our loving God for all eternity. It is our acceptance of our finite time on this earth and belief in the world to come that provides us with both the hope

and humility to embrace the loving, God-centered life Jesus died and rose to make possible.

My dear friends in Christ, we don't have to join in the rat-race in which everyone is scrambling to get as much as they can before they die. Death will be here soon enough.

But life with and in God will never end.

Remember that you are dust . . .

Repent . . .

Believe in the Gospel . . .

That's the perfect formula for living the incredible life God has in store for you and me.

Have a blessed Lent.