

Beginning Lent with Ash Wednesday



Prayer for a Renewed Spirit

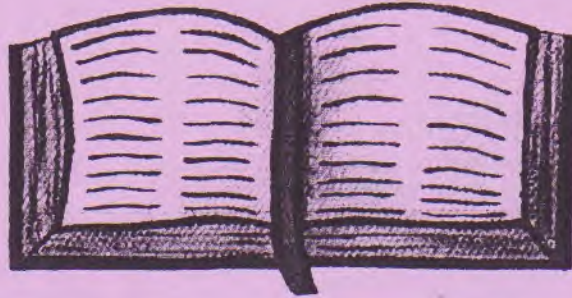
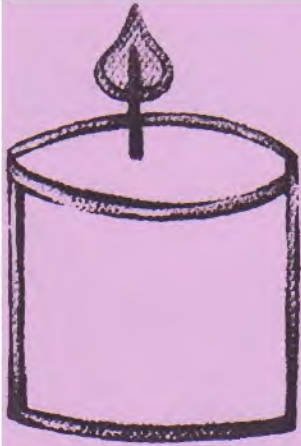
God of all compassion,
you who sent us your Son Jesus
when we were lost and broken,
turn to us again.
Give us strength and courage
to follow your call,
as did Jesus' first friends.
You who called Mary, Matthew, Andrew,
and Mary Magdalene,
call our names too.
Help us to hear your voice,
and to run toward Easter with joy.
Let us become our best selves,
fulfilling your purpose for us.
We ask this through our Lord
Jesus Christ your Son, who
lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit
one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Wednesday, March 9, 2011 Ashes and Joy

Today's Readings: Joel 2:12–18; 2 Corinthians 5:20—6:2; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18. It may seem like an odd combination: ashes, the symbol of penance for sin, and joy in the Resurrection that we celebrate during Easter. Why does the Church's long wisdom situate our journey toward Easter in a heap of ashes? The continuous cycles of renewal in God's creation offer a clue: the muckiest mulch produces the loveliest flowers. In a compost heap, dead leaves, rotten vegetable skins, and over-ripe fruit create a rich and fertile soil. Jesus drew on the natural world to teach spiritual truths—the mustard seed, the vine and the branches, the grain of wheat that must die—and the Church has always used natural elements as symbols: water, oil, beeswax, palm branches, bread, wine, ash.

Today's readings capture the spirit of penance and humility with which we need to begin our soul searching. Although the First Reading does not directly mention ashes, we associate its penitential tone with other scriptures that do. In the book of Esther, for example, the beautiful queen who had hidden her Jewish identity from the king suddenly must expose it to save her people. She prepares for this trial by setting aside her jewelry and covering her head with ashes and dirt (4:13), asking her people to join her. Their gesture expresses their complete humility before God, their desperate need for him, and their sorrow for their sins. Esther is ultimately victorious and the people receive new life—for us a preview of Easter joy!

This Week at Home



Monday, March 7 Feast before the Fast

Mardi Gras is French for “fat Tuesday.” Anticipating a season of fasting, this day has customarily been the last chance before Lent for rich foods. In some places, it’s also a time for jazz, masks, parades, and dance—a day to get high spirits out of our systems before a more sober season. Now we sing our last “Alleluias” until Easter. The beginning of Lent is also a time for house cleaning, both within and without. What clutter could you discard? What sins still burden you? What things or practices do you need to move toward? Today’s Readings: Tobit 1:3; 2:1a–8; Mark 12:1–12.

Tuesday, March 8 Focusing on God’s Voice

Some Lenten practices of fasting originated among people who faced food shortages in the early spring. Now we have the opposite problem: many of us are overfed. We are overfed physically, and we are over-stimulated mentally, with so much visual and audio data flooding our senses that it’s hard to focus on anything for long—including God. Lent gives us an opportunity to lay down these burdens—of excess food and of mental distractions, leaving us freer to hear God’s voice. Today’s Readings: Tobit 2:9–14; Mark 12:13–17.

Wednesday, March 9 Return to Me

Read the first few lines of today’s passage from Joel as if they were addressed to you personally, even filling in your name after the word *heart* in the phrase “return to me with all your heart.” Imagine someone who loves you deeply telling you these words. Tearing garments was once a sign of penitence. But the exterior demonstration is usually easier than the inner change of heart. What small, dark corners of your heart are still not given totally to God? Today’s Readings: Joel 2:12–18; 2 Corinthians 5:20—6:2; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18.

Thursday, March 10 In Training

Take a cue from people preparing for a marathon race. (Saint Paul used this comparison in 1 Corinthians 9:24.) They prepare with discipline, eating healthy foods, running a little further each day. Often, these aren’t athletes in superb shape, but ordinary people who gladly make the effort to become more fit. “It was worth every sacrifice,” they say at the end. Do we bring the same energy and dedication to growing closer to God? In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells us to take up our cross daily. There will be suffering. But let’s also imagine with joy how eagerly God anticipates our arrival in the circle of divine intimacy. Today’s Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15–20; Luke 9:22–25.

Friday, March 11 Doing Justice

Isaiah gives us yet another lesson on fasting today. How does God prefer that we fast? By doing justice! What work of justice could you take up this Lent? Will you study an issue and learn how to advocate for a change in law or policy for an oppressed group? You might visit the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Department of Migration and Refugee Services Web site to look at their tools for advocacy work at <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/advocacytools.shtml>. Today’s Readings: Isaiah 58:1–9a; Matthew 9:14–15.

Saturday, March 12 Choosing Lenten Practices

On Ash Wednesday, the very day we wear ashes, the Gospel gives us Jesus’ warning *not* to fast like hypocrites, whose gloomy appearance alerts others to their fasting (Matthew 6:16). In the secret depth of your heart, you may already know what luxuries to forego, what service to give, how to spend more time in prayer. There’s no need to boast about your Lenten practices. Simply do them to move closer to God and to answer Jesus’ call to repentance in today’s Gospel. Today’s Readings: Isaiah 58:9b–14; Luke 5:27–32.

