



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Ash Wednesday

#### Our Ashes

[RCL] Joel 2:1-2,12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103 or 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10;  
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

There are times when our fellow Christians – and perhaps we ourselves – can be extremely irritating to the rest of society. Even setting aside the major downers like the Crusades, witch hunts, and the general condemnation of an astonishing number of social groups, we Christians are guilty of creating *billions* of self-righteous posts on social media. And just when we think that we're merely doing our jobs as faithful witnesses by telling the rest of the world how direly wrong, immoral, and inhumane they are, we hear this challenging Gospel: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in Heaven."

What's worse, it comes on the one day in which we're all going to be walking around with big crosses of ash on our foreheads for all the world to see! It's almost as if some liturgical prankster has sneaked a zinger into the annual cycle of readings. We may find ourselves tempted to ask, "Why *are* we going around wearing these ashes, if not for everyone to see our piety? Isn't this a public proclamation of our Christian dedication, of our Episcopal superiority to the rest of the ash-less masses? Are we really any better than those praying on street corners or fasting with drawn faces?"

In the ancient world, giving alms, praying, and keeping fasts were signs of holiness and devotion, but wearing ashes was not. Wearing ashes on your forehead was not the ancient equivalent of a "Honk if you love Jesus!" bumper sticker; instead, it was the ancient world equivalent of a dunce cap. Rather than serving to declare our holiness, wearing ashes is literally a proclamation of our sinfulness, our mortality, our finitude. In the ancient world, to go about in ashes and sackcloth was to say to all the world, "I have really, really messed up!" I am nothing, less than nothing — literally, just a handful of dust.

In wearing ashes on Ash Wednesday, we are not showing what good Christians we are, but in fact what *terrible* Christians we are! Our ashes proclaim that we have strayed from the path of Christ, turning each to his or her own way like lost sheep. That each of us has been overwhelmed by pride, by selfishness, by unkindness, by anger.

Our ashes proclaim to the world that we are mortal, that we are finite. That, in the grand scheme of things, our lives are inconceivably short — nothing but an infinitesimally small blip on the giant screen of history — that all of our anxieties and fears, all of our great accomplishments and impressive attainments, are almost nothing, for we ourselves are nothing but dust, and to dust shall we return.

The big difference between the ashes that we will wear, and the ashes worn by other ancient people proclaiming themselves to be miserable failures, is that ours are not thrown indiscriminately onto our foreheads. Instead, our ashes take the form of the Cross. They are not merely a reminder of our incredible finitude, of the extreme brevity of our lives, and of our general inability to live as we should, but they are in the shape of God's *answer* to that finitude, God's *answer* to that brokenness and that weakness. They are in the shape of God's *answer* to our selfishness, God's *answer* to our pride, to our sin: they are in the shape of Jesus' self-sacrifice, the shape of the way in which he poured himself out for us, gave himself, not to be our accuser, but to be the remedy and cure for our sin. *Not* through saving us from his wrath or condemnation, but through saving us from *ourselves*.

The Cross of ashes proclaims to the world, "Everything I've ever accomplished, everything I've ever failed at, all of my dreams and all of my fears, are all totally insignificant in the grand sweep of history, *and yet*, to God — to the only One who is *eternally* older than all of history, who is *infinitely* beyond the immensity of the universe — I and *every single one* of my little, tiny concerns, are of infinite importance because God loves me infinitely."

Through God the Son's incarnation, through his life and teaching, and most of all through his suffering and death upon the cross, we know that every single one of us is worth everything to God because *all* of this was done specifically for you, specifically for me. That is how much you matter. That is how important you are. That God incarnate gave himself to wake each of us up to reality, to call every single one of us, his children, back home.

Today you will receive the cross of ashes upon your forehead: for this one day, you will wear your deepest, darkest, most shameful secrets on the outside, as a mark upon your forehead. But you will also wear your hope, your hope that all is not lost because of your weakness, but instead that all has been gained because Almighty God became weak to join you in weakness, because the Eternal Word of God became a finite person to join you in your mortality. That even in the depths of sin we are completely known and completely loved by our Heavenly Father, who is in the world, searching for each of us like lost sheep, actively seeking us out, to take us into his arms of love and bring us home.

**Bertie Pearson** serves as rector of St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. He also produced the popular podcast *The History of Christianity with Bertie Pearson*. This podcast is an exploration of the ideas and themes which continue to shape the Christian faith, and is available on Spotify, iTunes, and wherever fine podcasts are distributed. Before his current parish, Bertie served both Spanish and English-language churches in Austin and San Francisco, played drums in the band *Poolside*, and toured as a DJ. He now lives a much more sedate life with his wife, Dr. Rabel Pearson, their two children, a small room full of dusty records, and a very goodhearted Australian Shepard named *Ida*.