

# Ash Wednesday

## OPENING PRAYER:

Holy God; our lives are laid open before you: rescue us from the chaos of sin and through the death of your Son bring us healing and make us whole in Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

## FIRST READING

**A reading from the book of the prophet Joel 2:12-17**

Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain-offering and a drink-offering for the LORD, your God?

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep. Let them say, 'Spare your people, O LORD, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, "Where is their God?"'

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM from Psalm 51

**R. Have mercy on us, O Lord, for we have sinned.**

1. Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness. In your compassion blot out my offence. O wash me more and more from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. **(R.)**

2. My offences truly I know them; my sin is always before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned; what is evil in your sight I have done. **(R.)**

3. A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, nor deprive me of you holy spirit. **(R.)**

4. Give me again the joy of your help; with the spirit of fervour sustain me.

O Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall declare your praise. **(R.)**

## SECOND READING

**A reading from the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians 5:20—6:2**

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For the Lord says, 'At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.' See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

## GOSPEL Matthew 6:1-6.16-21

**Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.**

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

Jesus said to the disciples, 'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

## Ash Wednesday — A Theological Reflection

Ash Wednesday does not begin with advice but with a command: "Return to me." Joel does not ask for emotion. He demands decision. Fasting, weeping and mourning are not theatre; they are signs that the heart has turned. To rend garments is easy. To rend the heart is harder. God calls for the second.

Psalm 51 names the truth we prefer to soften. Sin is not weakness or mistake. It is offence against God. "Against you, you alone, have I sinned." The problem is not image but guilt. The answer is not self-improvement but mercy.

Paul speaks even more sharply: "Be reconciled to God." Reconciliation is not negotiation between equals. God acts first. Christ is made sin for us. The cross is not example but exchange. What we are, he bears; what he is, he gives.

In the Gospel, Jesus strips religion of performance. Giving, praying and fasting can become displays. God sees in secret. Lent is therefore not public drama but ordered obedience. Treasure in heaven means a heart set where Christ reigns.

Ashes will be placed upon our heads. They do not symbolise despair. They tell the truth: we are dust, and we will return to dust. Lent begins in mortality and ends in resurrection. The Church does not deny death; it walks through repentance toward life.

Now is the acceptable time. Not tomorrow. Not when convenient. Ash Wednesday confronts us with the seriousness of sin and the greater seriousness of grace.

## PRAYER OVER THE GIFTS:

Merciful God, turn us from sin to faithfulness, accept our offering and prepare us to celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ our Saviour, who is alive and reigns, now and for ever. **Amen.**

## COMMUNION SENTENCE:

*The one who meditates day and night on the law of the Lord will yield fruit in due season.*

## PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION:

Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us both a sacrifice for sin and also an example of godly life: give us grace that we may always most thankfully receive these his inestimable gifts, and also daily endeavour to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**