

sins and ask His forgiveness. That's the essence of this service. We confess our sins, we come to have the mark of the Cross placed on our foreheads as an outward sign of remorse, and we receive Christ Jesus in the holy elements of the Eucharist.

For those who *don't* know the Lord Jesus Christ personally, there is no better time than right now, to ask Him into your heart. All you have to do is to tell Him you are sorry for your sins, and ask Him to forgive you and to come into your heart. Jesus will do that, if you ask Him, because He loves you and He wants to see you made whole again. Let me urge you, if you haven't asked Jesus into your heart, not to leave this place until you do. Your life today and forever, depends on it.

You know, salvation isn't rocket science! It's God's love poured out from the hard wood of the Cross for you and for me. Nothing we can say or do can make us worthy of His love. That's a free gift, offered by our gracious, loving God. However, the things we do and say *can* make us more open to receive His love, and *that's* why we have a whole season to pause, reflect, and consider. It's part of a spiritual journey that we are each invited to take, so that when Easter arrives, we can truly join in the celebrations knowing that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

So let us thank God for this holy day. Let us thank Him for His written Word which calls us to acts of prayer and repentance and generosity toward others. Above all, let us thank Him for loving us so much that He gave His only Son Jesus Christ to ransom, heal, restore and forgive us.

May God grant each of us a holy Lent.

Χάρις τῷ θεῷ, εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος. Ἀμήν

## ASH WEDNESDAY

2014-03-05

Parish of Georgina—S. James' Church, Sutton

**A**sh Wednesday is described in the Oxford Dictionary of the Church as “the first day of Lent, six and a half weeks before Easter.” It is an ancient celebration, added in the seventh century to provide exactly forty weekdays before Easter. I'll remind you again on Sunday that Sundays are always feast days, even in Lent. So we fast, or at least do penitential things during the weekdays of Lent, while feasting and celebrating on the Sundays in that season.

Today's readings provide the shape for our liturgy on Ash Wednesday. We gather, on this one focal day of the year, to read the ancient texts that call us to return to God with all our heart, and with fasting, weeping, and mourning. What we have read in the Scriptures, we actually *do*. And we sanctify the feast by making Eucharist together, that we may welcome Jesus Christ among us, and be welcomed by Him.

We might say that today is a day on which we are called to stop dead in our tracks, and not to take another step in any direction, until we have put ourselves right with God. It's a day for repentance. We are to repent our sins, both known and unknown. And this requires of us, some deep soul-searching.

When Jesus spoke about the giving of alms, fasting, and praying, during His sermon on the mount, He was speaking about reconciliation with God.

- *Prayer* draws us to God through direct spiritual contact. We need this just as surely as we need to feel loved. Our times of prayer are periods of listening, as much as speaking, so that we might hear the voice of God in our stillness and be attentive to His Will.

- *Fasting* reminds us that all things come from God, and that we are totally dependent upon our heaven Father for everything we have, including the things we eat. This is why we ought always to thank God before every meal. Denying ourselves the satisfaction of food is a means of overcoming one of our most basic survival instincts in order to focus on God and His goodness.
- And *alms-giving*—our offering to God of a portion of our income or wealth—is a means of sharing the physical realities of love and nurture among those less fortunate than us. How tragic that the bulk of our modern alms-giving only offsets some of the costs of ministry to, and among, ourselves!

I'd like you to notice something, here. In the text, Jesus doesn't say *if* you give alms, *if* you pray, or *if* you fast: He says *when* or *whenever* you give alms, pray or fast. These were normal activities for the religious person in Jesus' time, and they should be seen as normal in our time as well.

Most people can join in these spiritual activities. Unless prevented by poor health, most people can manage to fast from time to time. Unless confronted by abject poverty, most of us can give alms, and we do. But even if we are prevented from fasting because of health issues, and even if we are unable to give to charity because of our own poverty, there is still one great activity in which all can participate, and that is *prayer*. Without exception, *all* of us can pray, even if we don't *think* we can.

Jesus identifies fasting, alms-giving and prayer as activities that are expected of us. But He goes a step further, in that He calls us to spiritual humility before God, when we do those things.

*If* everyone is expected to fast once in a while, or to give money for the poor, or to pray, then where is the special virtue in

doing these things? That's our duty, isn't it? Yes, they are essential activities, because they help us to focus on God's Providence and on our participation in sharing that Providence with others. Anything that takes our attention away from ourselves and places it upon God is a unique kind of blessing. And that's why we should take great care when we pray, or fast, or give alms, to *keep the focus on God*, rather than drawing attention to ourselves. The virtue lies, not in doing the activity, *but in doing it secretly*, so that only God knows what we have done, or why.

Lent is a season in which we are called to penitence. It is a time for introspection, a time for looking deep within ourselves to try to discover the things that separate us from God and prevent us from receiving His love.

You might even say that the forty days of Lent are a season for spiritual spring-cleaning! Just as a house has several rooms, and each room needs washing or vacuuming or dusting or re-arranging, so we have different areas in our lives, each of which requires examination, cleaning, or re-arranging.

For example, have you become complacent about your prayer-life in the past year? Have you yielded to some temptation of the flesh? Have you done something, either to God or to another person, of which you are ashamed? Are you carrying a burden of guilt?

These are all things that can distance us from sensing God's love. God still loves us, but each time we sin, we place a barrier between God and ourselves. The more we sin, the higher and wider the barrier becomes.

Today, we can do something about it.

For those who know the Lord personally, we can confess our