



## Ash Wednesday

### Holy Dust

[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

The Ash Wednesday liturgy is possibly the most meaningful liturgy in our Book of Common Prayer. It offers us an opportunity to stop, reflect on who we are and whose we are, adopt an attitude of humility, hit the reset button, and begin again. We are invited to stop the whirlwind of life and activities that surround us on all sides and remember: God hates nothing God has made; God forgives the sins of all who are penitent; our God is the “God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness.” As if all this in the opening collect is not enough, the reminder that we “are dust, and to dust [we] shall return” ought to put our life in Christ into a proper perspective of humility.

This is made visible and tangible with the imposition of ashes from last year’s Palm Sunday palms, which seem to retrace the Baptismal Cross on our foreheads as a reminder of the promises we make each time we renew our Baptismal Covenant: to participate in the full life of the Body of Christ, his Church; to say we are sorry whenever we have violated our relationships with God and others, all others; that everything we do and say will proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ; that we will seek and serve Christ in all persons; that we will strive for justice and peace for all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

The Church has long recognized how challenging it is to keep these core promises that constitute walking in the Way of Christ. This is why we set aside these forty days each year for self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting, and self-denial; to read and meditate on God’s holy Word. The ashes of Ash Wednesday remind us not only of our mortality and need for regular repentance but also that it is only by God’s “gracious gift that we are given everlasting life” through Jesus Christ.

Although we are to remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return, we ought never to forget that we are Holy Dust, created and inspired by the very breath and Spirit of God, as described in Genesis chapter 2: “The Lord God formed man [*ba-adam/ ba-ab-dham*] from the dust of the ground [*ba-adamah/ ba-ab-dhamab*] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” In these days, as we reflect on our relationship to the Earth itself, the Hebrew reminds us just how interconnected and interdependent we really are – *adam*, man, is made of the dust of the ground, *adamah*. Just as Moses was reminded by the burning bush that he was standing on Holy Ground, so the ashes of Ash Wednesday

remind us that everywhere we stand, everywhere we walk, every speck of dust is Holy Ground – and that we are made Holy from the moment of our very first breath. Receiving these ashes is meant to remind us of these humbling and defining truths.

Next to the Cross itself, however, there is no more tender and revealing moment in God’s Holy Word than that proclaimed on Ash Wednesday by the prophet Joel, who in days of great darkness and gloom calls the people of God to a solemn assembly to pray for deliverance. Yet, amid this call to return to the Lord with all our hearts, the prophet reminds us of God’s very essence, and then imagines just how much the Lord our God loves us:

“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?”

Do we hear this? When we are enveloped with such darkness and gloom that we are unable to make the appointed sacrifices to God, unable to turn our hearts and minds back to God on our own, the prophet imagines that the Lord God himself will make the appointed sacrifices himself, leaving a grain offering and a drink offering on our behalf – which offerings constitute the essence of our Holy Communion. We are those people who, like the prophet, can imagine that God enters our lives and leaves an offering and blessing for us every Sunday – because our God is the God who is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”

This realization of God’s love and care for us brings us to our knees and a Litany of Repentance in which we rehearse all the possible ways in which we stray from the way of the Lord God, the Way of Christ. It is after this remarkable and thorough confession that the reset button is pressed, and we are forgiven by Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that “the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy, so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy.”

Ash Wednesday: A day to stop, reflect on who we are and whose we are, adopt an attitude of humility, and hit the reset button of our life in Christ. A day to remember that we are dust, but that we are Holy Dust, animated by God’s own breath. For it is God’s own Spirit that enlivens us and sustains us, day in and day out. A day to remember that God loves us so much as to make sacrifices for us when we are unable to do

so ourselves. A day to allow God in Christ to forgive us so that we might live the residue of our lives reflecting the very love that God has for us and for all of creation. A day that we may remind ourselves with great humility to love God, love all others, and love all of creation itself. For that is what it means to be the Holy Dust of God! Amen.

***The Rev. Kirk Alan Kubicek** is currently priest-in-charge at Christ Church, Rock Spring Parish, Forest Hill, Md. Christ Church is a Small but Mighty parish, and together we are rediscovering what our Lord has in store for our future. He has spent over 35 years in parish ministry in all shapes and size parishes, and for 15 years worked with The Episcopal Church Office of Stewardship and TENS. He often uses storytelling, music, and guitar in proclaiming the Good News. Married with three adult children and one grandson, Kirk also plays drums in On The Bus, a DC Metro Area Grateful Dead tribute band. All shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of thing shall be well!*