

Sackcloth & Ashes



The custom of using sackcloth and ashes in religious ritual is rooted in the Old Testament. The prophet Jeremiah, for example, calls for repentance this way: "O daughter of my people, gird on sackcloth, roll in the ashes" (Jer 6:26).

The prophet Daniel pleaded for God to rescue Israel with sackcloth and ashes as a sign of Israel's repentance: "I turned to the Lord God, pleading in earnest prayer, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes" (Dn 9:3).

When the prophet Jonah finally obeyed God's command and preached in the great city of Nineveh, his preaching was amazingly effective. Word of his message was carried to the king of Nineveh. "When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in the ashes" (Jon 3:6). In one of the instances of humor in the bible, even the animals were forced to "wear" sackcloth.

In the book of Judith, we find acts of repentance that specify that the ashes were put on people's heads: "And all the Israelite men, women and children who lived in Jerusalem prostrated themselves in front of the temple building, with ashes strewn on their heads,

displaying their sackcloth covering before the Lord" (Jdt 4:11; see also 4:15 and 9:1).

Just prior to the New Testament period, the rebels fighting for Jewish independence, the Maccabees, prepared for battle wearing sackcloth and ashes: "That day they fasted and wore sackcloth; they sprinkled ashes on their heads and tore their clothes" (1 Mc 3:47; see also 4:39).

Despite all these references in Scripture, the use of ashes in the Church left only a few records in the first millennium of Church history. Near the end of the 12th century, Pope Urban II called for the general use of ashes on the first day of Lent. Only later did this day come to be called Ash Wednesday. At first, clerics and men had ashes sprinkled on their heads, while women had the sign of the cross made with ashes on their foreheads. Eventually, of course, the ritual used with women came to be used for men as well.

Also in the 12th century the rule developed that the ashes were to be created by burning palm branches from the previous Palm Sunday. Many parishes today invite parishioners to bring such palms to church before Lent begins and have a ritual burning of the palms after Mass.

The call to continuing conversion reflected in these readings is also the message of the ashes. We move through Lent from ashes to the baptismal font. We dirty our faces on Ash Wednesday and are cleansed in the waters of the font. More profoundly, we embrace the need to die to sin and selfishness at the beginning of Lent so that we can come to fuller life in the Risen One at Easter.

When we receive ashes on our foreheads, we remember who we are. We remember that we are creatures of the earth ("Remember that you are dust"). We remember that we are mortal beings ("and to dust you will return"). We remember that we are baptized. We remember that we are people on a journey of conversion ("Repent and believe in the gospel"). We remember that we are members of the body of Christ (and that smudge on our foreheads will proclaim that identity to others, too).

Some people believe that ashes contain some special magic or powers beyond their spiritual symbolism. There are those who believe that ashes have the power to ward off evil and prolong life. The church teaches that such superstitions go against our belief in God. The real power of the ashes is in the internal disposition of the believer who receives the ashes on Ash Wednesday. It is what we make of the symbol as we travel through the journey of Lent.

Renewing our sense of who we really are before God is the core of the Lenten experience. It is so easy to forget, and thus we fall into habits of sin, ways of thinking and living that are contrary to God's will. In this we are like the Ninevites in the story of Jonah. It was "their wickedness" that caused God to send Jonah to preach to them. Jonah resisted that mission and found himself in deep water. Rescued by a large fish, Jonah finally did God's bidding and began to preach in Nineveh. His preaching obviously fell on open ears and hearts, for in one day he prompted the conversion of the whole city.

From the very beginning of Lent, God's word calls us to conversion. If we open our ears and hearts to that word, we will be like the Ninevites not only in their sinfulness but also in their conversion to the Lord. That, simply put, is the point of Ash Wednesday!