

10am HC (BCP) and 7.30pm HC on Ash Wednesday, 17 February 2026
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17, 2 Cor 5:20b-6:10 and Matt 6:1-6, 16-21 – Ashing is only the beginning of a journey from forgiveness into peace and grace

There's an obvious contradiction in our service today between what we have heard and what we are about to do. Having heard our Gospel reading, the obvious question that we should be asking ourselves is: why do we disfigure our faces with ash, making it so plain to others that we have been to church today, when Jesus expressly commands his disciples not to disfigure their faces to show others what they've been doing? When Jesus has explicitly told us to ***beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them***, would the church invite anybody to mark their face with just such a visible sign of their piety?

In trying to find the answer to this apparent contradiction, I came across a fascinating article, written three years ago by historian of Protestantism Steven Wedgworth, about the history of the imposition of ashes (or "ashing"). I learned that in 1091 the then Pope had officially sanctioned ashing. But ashing then dropped out of favour in the 16th century, during the Reformation. Luther and the other 16th century Reformation theologians favoured retaining the observation of Lent, Palm Sunday and Holy Week, but the Reformers wanted to do away with some of the customary practices around Lent and Easter. And that included ashing, which was outlawed in England in 1548. So there was no ashing in the Ash Wednesday service when the Prayer Book was published in 1549, nor in the version published in 1552, nor in the one we know today, from 1662.

In fact, for more than three centuries, ashing was completely absent from Ash Wednesday services in Protestant churches across the world. When the minister at St James Church in Brighton tried to re-introduce ashing in 1868, no less a body than the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council (a court equivalent to England's House of Lords or Supreme Court) ruled it was illegal, and the minister was deposed. In fact, it was not until new liturgies were adopted in 1979 in the USA, and then in 1986 in England, that ashing became a part of the Ash Wednesday service again.

Ashing had troubled Hugh Latimer, and Thomas Cranmer, and all those other 16th century Reformers, because they thought ashing was a practice that risked undermining people's confidence in what the Reformers knew to be true: that trusting in Jesus' death on the cross was sufficient for salvation. The Reformers knew that nothing else was, or is, necessary for salvation. Nothing that we can do, nothing that we abstain from doing, can earn us a place in heaven. Our hope of heaven is found in Christ alone.

Ashing also troubled the Reformers because of the danger of it giving people a false sense of their security in Christ, without people ever having recognised that they needed to turn to Christ. One of the Reformers contrasted what he called "*the empty ceremony of sprinkling ashes on the heads of all that were present*", whether or not they were genuinely penitent with the true repentance that the Ash Wednesday service was seeking to prompt.

Jesus himself, in our Gospel reading, warned his listeners about the dangers of simply going through the motions of religious activity, just to be seen to be doing what religious faith required, and without actually engaging with God our Father. We all have a tendency to care about what other people think of us and to want to impress them. Even though I know that it shouldn't matter to me, I regret that it does matter whether I've been able to upload that quite impressive run to Strava. I am more bothered than I should be about whether the holiday photos I've put on the family group chat show quite what a great holiday I'm having.

But Jesus is very clear about this. We are not to be sounding a trumpet about our charitable giving; or going somewhere as public as possible to pray; or drawing attention to our fasting by going round with a long face; or bemoaning to our friends how hard it is to live without alcohol, or chocolate, or Instagram, or whatever. If we are going to do any of these things, we should be doing them in secret.

Three times Jesus says that the people who do all these things purely for show, just ***in order to be seen by others*** and ***so that they may be praised by others***,

well, ***they have already received their reward***. Three times Jesus says that if you do all these things in secret – whether it is charitable giving, or praying, or fasting – ***your Father who sees in secret will reward you***. Our reading from the prophet Joel also reminded us to ***rend your hearts and not your clothing***. It is good to be doing these things, as long as we do them with the right motivation.

One of the children who came to this morning's service asked a good question when she asked, "when should we wash off the ashes?". It was a good question because it reminded us that the benefit of the ashes does not come from being marked with ash, but from the physical act of the ashing itself. We feel the mark of the cross being made on our forehead as we hear the words that remind us of our sin and of our mortality. Ashing is one of those things that we do with our bodies that can help us in our faith.

Ashing is not the only practice of the church in which we are consciously worshipping with our bodies, and not just with our hearts and minds. When we take communion later, we will be very aware that Jesus commanded us to do so. As we take into our bodies the bread and wine which will be to us his body and blood, there could hardly be a more physical way of engaging ourselves, body and mind, in our worship. And in baptism, whether it is the infant over whose head the water is poured or the waters in which an adult is totally immersed, the physicality of the water expresses the washing away of our sin. We are physical people who worship with physical actions, and in these physical actions we are expressing a unity with the God who became incarnate and who himself instituted these reminders of his grace to us.

Ashing, like prayer, and like fasting, can help us to reflect on our own mortality and on our need for salvation from sin. And it can steer us towards the repentance that leads us to turn to Jesus. But it is not the ashing itself that saves us from our sin. It is as we move from our prayers of penitence and through the imposition of ashes, and towards communion and blessing, that we come to know the grace of God. As we come to communion, we are reminded of the peace that we have with God through Jesus, because of his cross and resurrection. And we are reminded that it is by his Holy Spirit that we grow in holiness.

Even on the first day of Lent, we do not stop at the ashing. Our Lenten journey begins, and ends, at the cross. As we journey towards Easter and into a greater understanding of God's grace to us, we do so always in the peace that comes from knowing that we are already forgiven.