

Ash Wednesday is the day when we come to get ashes and mark (both literally and figuratively) the beginning of Lent. For most of us, we come more quietly, more humbly; not the way we enter church on a usual Sunday.

This different behavior, learned, taught, or presupposed, is how we understand the entering in to the season of Lent. We come in a more solemn and serious manner. I know people who dread Ash Wednesday for what they think it represents. They associate great discomfort with Ash Wednesday for what they think it forces them to admit about themselves. It is something to go through - something to get through in order to arrive at Easter.

At first glance, the readings seem to agree with that attitude of doom and gloom. Joel talks about the day of great darkness - thick darkness - when all the inhabitants of the earth will tremble. The foreboding prediction changes to a challenging conviction when we hear the prophet say; “The Lord says return to me with all your heart, with fasting, and weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing.”

Along with this come words of assurance; “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Paul writes to the people of Corinth and acknowledges all that must be endured to be a Christian - the afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, and imprisonments; the sleepless nights and the hunger. And the comfort for this suffering is the knowledge that even though they are treated badly and understood wrongly, they are rich; seen as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

Ash Wednesday practices have evolved over the years. Long ago, ashes marked on the foreheads of worshippers were not given to everyone. They were given only to the public penitents who were brought before the church. There was stigma, much like Hester Prynne bearing her scarlet letter or Cain bearing the mark on his forehead. These notorious sinners were marked publicly with the sign of their disgrace. [<http://www.cresourcei.org/cyashwed.html>]

As time went on, more and more people began to ask for ashes on their forehead, showing their humility for their own wrongdoings and their affection for the penitents who were willing to make public amends. This trend spread and eventually the receiving of ashes was extended to the whole congregation.

And this is now very much the spirit of Ash Wednesday, as I understand it, not to single people out for what they have done, but to realize that we are all capable of

doing wrong and that the act of contrition we are willing to make is, in the end, what matters more.

“Create a clean heart in me, O God, and renew a right spirit in me.” These words from Psalm 51 (which we’ll say later) are much more the meaning and purpose of Lent than the tone set by “I am a miserable offender and there is no hope in me.”

The Collect inspires a positive feeling when it says, “Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. This is the language of transformation, not the language of condemnation.

I understand Lent as a “season of great hope when with ashes on our foreheads and hope in our hearts, we go forth to love and serve. For by God’s grace [ ], we do not have to stay the way we are.” Ibid.