

Sunday Morning Resources

Wednesday 18 February 2026 - Ash Wednesday

Lectionary Readings (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you **must** use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

Joel 2.1-2, 12-17 [or Isaiah 58. 1-12]; Psalm 51. 1-18; 2 Corinthians 5.20b - chapter 6.10; Matthew 6.1-6, and 16-21

Homily

Today's homily has been written by the Revd Canon Dr Robert Mackley, Incumbent - Vicar, St Mary the Less, Cambridge

In many churches today they're about to do something pretty weird. People are about to come forward and have someone smear ash on their foreheads and tell them that they're going to die.

And we wonder why Christianity isn't more popular!

But we don't do this because we have a morbid fascination with death or because we are pessimists or negative people. Contrary to what some people think about the church...

No, we do it to remind ourselves to get our lives in order and perspective. People on their death beds rarely regret not earning more or not spending more time dwelling on a grudge. We come to be reminded that we are going to return to the earth, in order to get our lives in order and perspective. What is truly important? Knowing that we are not going to be here for ever helps us to find out. Ash Wednesday is our annual reality check.

We do it also to remind ourselves that we are human. The speed with which I can type and look things up on my phone, the fact that I can order something on Amazon tonight and get it delivered tomorrow and the fact that surgeons can stick a camera up my groin through my body and into my head and there perform surgery inside an artery: all this can make us forget that we are human. That we are human and limited and cannot do everything nor do it all at once. I am made of dust and I need sleep, rest and downtime but also, I make mistakes and do things I shouldn't and need forgiveness. We remind ourselves on Ash Wednesday that we are creatures. Creatures are things that were created, that didn't make themselves. I am not the centre of the universe and I need not to expect myself to be nor have others expect it. Ash Wednesday is our annual reality check.

We are human. We are created. We are going to die.

And so, we need God.

We spend a lot of time shoring up our defences against him, often entirely unconsciously because we're just trying to cope in the world.

Lent is our time to stretch out towards God in need and longing. Lent – the very word – comes from the word for lengthening, as the days grow longer. This season is a springtime for the soul when we try to stretch out towards God. And Jesus has given us three gifts to help us do this. Almsgiving, fasting and prayer.

Each of these three things chips away at our shell, our wall of defence against the divine love. Almsgiving and fasting are about going without stuff to discover that I don't need it in order to be me, to be worthwhile, to be loveable. For God has already loved and desired me since before the foundation of the world. Almsgiving and fasting make me vulnerable and reveal my needs and desires and so they let God in.

And prayer is how God gets in. If you look at our Gospel reading today, you'll see that verses 7 to 15 of chapter 6 are left out. They are where Jesus, having warned against praying in order to be seen, goes on to teach his disciples how to pray and he teaches them not some sophisticated theory or technique but simply the Lord's Prayer. If our Lent were to consist of nothing more than kneeling down and praying the Lord's Prayer slowly, attentively and with all our heart once each day, the next 40 days would truly not have been wasted.

But there's one more thing the ashes do this day. They are ash. They come from palm crosses being burned.

And the final, and most important thing these ashes do this day is to point us to Easter. Lent begins in ash but ends in fire: the fire of the Easter Vigil, celebrated in Cathedrals and parish churches up and down the land, as Jesus leads us out of darkness into the light of his resurrection; the fire of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples giving them gifts of forgiveness and joy and the proclamation of the faith.

For Ash Wednesday teaches us not just that we are human, that we are creatures; it doesn't just teach us that we are going to die: it teaches us that we are going to live. That through the death of Jesus comes life to us all, that what begins with ash ends with fire, the fire of love, a love that no evil can destroy and a love that will carry us in Jesus through the grave to the kingdom of heaven.

Wondering Questions: Some wondering questions that may help to engage all generations to ponder and explore during the talk, service or during the week may include (three or so) of the following style of questions:

- I wonder what your favourite part of the story/passage is? I wonder why that is?
- I wonder who your favourite character is? I wonder why that is?
- I wonder how _____ felt or I wonder how _____ felt when _____ happened?
- I wonder how you feel about _____?
- I wonder where you are in this story?
- I wonder what part of the story is about you?
- I wonder what the [tree, pearl, coin] could really be?
- I wonder why _____ said _____?
- I wonder what we can learn about God in this story?

Suggested intercessions

Let us enter the wilderness with the Lord, confident in the Spirit and turning to our Father in prayer:

Father, that you would strengthen Sarah, Bishop-designate of Ely, Dagmar our Acting Bishop and every Christian person to walk the way of the Cross in these forty days, we pray:

Lord, hear us

Lord, graciously hear us

Father, that you would turn the world to ways of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, that nations and peoples may repent of their violence, possessiveness and rage, we pray:

Lord, hear us

Lord, graciously hear us

Father, that the disciplines of Lent may make us more aware of the needs of those around us and open the eyes of our hearts to Jesus' presence in the world, we pray:

Lord, hear us

Lord, graciously hear us

Father, that those already in the wilderness of bodily or mental pain, of homelessness, poverty or addiction, may benefit from our prayer, fasting and almsgiving and may know the care of your angels, we pray:

Lord, hear us

Lord, graciously hear us

Father, that as we begin our pilgrimage to the passion, those who have already shared in Christ's death may also share in his resurrection, washed from their sins and presented spotless before you, we pray:

Lord, hear us

Lord, graciously hear us

Father, bless this Lent, strengthen us in the Communion of Saints to keep these forty days, and hear us as we plead:

Merciful Father, **accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Suggested hymns/songs

From New Hymns & Worship Songs:

8 All that I am

45 Cry Freedom

60 Filled with the Spirit's power
67 From many grains
102 Heaven shall not wait
121 I need thee every hour
136 It's me, O Lord
139 Jesus Christ is waiting
144 Jesus put this song into our hearts
153 Kum ba yah
154 Kyrie
157 Let there be love
184 My God, accept my heart this day
197 O Lord, hear our prayer
199 O Lord of our salvation
201 O Love, that wilt not let me go
246 Take my life and let it be
292 Will you come and follow me
294 Within our darkest night

From the New English Hymnal:

59 Now is the healing time decreed
61 O Christ, who art the light and day
62 Ah holy Jesu, how hast thou offended
63 All ye who seek a comfort sure
67 Forty days and forty nights
70 Lord Jesus think on me
71 Maker of earth, to thee alone
74 O for a heart to praise my God
75 O thou who dost accord us
84 It is a thing most wonderful
382 Jesu, grant me this, I pray

Activities to accompany the service

If you are looking for resources to accompany the service for engaging younger children, then there are lots of online resources. The following free to access/download resources may be useful starting points:

- <https://flamecreativekids.blogspot.com/>
- <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/MessyChurchBRF/>
- <https://www.faithinkids.org/>
- [reflectionary.org](https://www.reflectionary.org/) – lectionary-based resources
- [engageworship](https://www.engageworship.org/) – in particular 'Area 52' for lectionary-based material
- <https://www.bdeducation.org.uk/product-category/primary-age-5-11/>
(weekly@lectionary resource)