

History and Significance of Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. By the fourth century the Western church had determined that the Lenten period of fasting and renewal should correspond to Christ's forty-day fast (Matt. 4:2), and, by counting forty days back from Easter (excluding Sundays, which remain "feast" days), arrived at the Wednesday seven weeks before Easter. At one time, Lent was primarily viewed as a period during which converts prepared for baptism on Easter Sunday, but later the season became a general time of penitence and renewal for all Christians. Thus, Ash Wednesday became the day that marked the beginning of the Lenten renewal.

The aim of Ash Wednesday worship is threefold:

1. to meditate on our mortality, sinfulness, and need of a savior
2. to renew our commitment to daily repentance in the Lenten season and in all of life
3. to remember with confidence and gratitude that Christ has conquered death and sin

Ash Wednesday worship witnesses to the power and beauty of our union with Christ and to the daily dying and rising with Christ that this entails. The imposition of ashes is often a central part of the worship service. The leader dips a finger in the ash and makes a cross on each person's forehead (the "imposition"), saying words such as "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

Ashes have a long history in biblical and church traditions. In Scripture ashes or dust symbolize frailty or death (Gen. 18:27), sadness or mourning (Esther 4:3), judgment (Lam. 3:16), and repentance (Jon. 3:6). Some traditions also have considered ash a purifying or cleansing agent. All these images are caught up in the church's use of ashes as a symbol appropriate for Lent – penitence, repentance, rededication, and renewal.

Adapted from *The Worship Sourcebook*