

Homily for the First Day of Lent, March 1, 2017

Sung Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17; Psalm 103:8–14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

The first record of ashes being used by Christians in association with penitence comes from sixth-century Spain.¹ Ashes were given to penitents who, because of serious public sin, had been publicly excommunicated.² A ritual for the imposition of ashes is found in the altar book for the bishop of Mainz, now Germany, in the tenth century as part of the liturgy at the beginning of Lent.³ In spite of the words of Jesus that we just heard—always associated with the Mass for the beginning of Lent—at the end of the eleventh century, Pope Urban II decided ashes would be offered to everyone on this day in the Western Church.⁴ Maybe not this year with the rain, but most years, in our city of New York, more people will enter churches today for ashes than on any other day of the year and for any other reason. I know of no other city

¹ Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 224.

² Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 448–49.

³ Talley, 224.

⁴ *Ibid.*

where this is true. So what do ashes mean for us?
What can ashes mean for us?

In New York ashes on Ash Wednesday and palms on Palm Sunday have become a quiet, public witness to Christian faith—and useful one, I think, on these days. I hope the ashes I give and the ashes I receive remind me, not only of what the liturgy calls “our mortal nature,” but also, “of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.”⁵

Jesus tells us later in Matthew’s gospel what it means to follow him. In the depiction of the last judgment, Jesus speaks of the sheep being separated from the goats.⁶ The sheep then wonder when they saw the King hungry and fed him, when he was thirsty and they gave him something to drink, when he was a stranger and they welcomed him, when naked and they clothed him, when sick they visited him, when he was in prison, they went to him. Scripture says, “And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’”⁷

⁵ *The Book of Common Prayer* [1979], 265.

⁶ Matthew 25:31–46.

⁷ Matthew 25:40.

New Testament writers argue about what comes first, faith or works. Paul wrote that we are justified by faith;⁸ the later Letter of James urges us to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only.”⁹ And more pointedly, “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.”¹⁰ But for me, faith and works have always seemed to travel together.

Jesus Christ, by the power of his Holy Spirit, still invites to look on others as our brothers and sisters and to love them.¹¹

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Copyright © 2017 The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York, New York.

All rights reserved.

⁸ Romans 3:28.

⁹ James 1:22.

¹⁰ James 2:18b.

¹¹ John 13:34.