

# The First Day of Lent: Ash Wednesday

February 17, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Isaiah 57:15, 58:1–12\*; Psalm 103:8–14; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21*

The Protestant wing of Anglicanism still avoids the blessing and imposition of ashes because of Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount that is the historic gospel for the beginning of Lent: "And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."<sup>1</sup>

For us, the optional blessing and imposition of ashes appears for the first time in the 1979 Prayer Book. That said, if I had to guess, I suspect this is the first year since the parish opened in 1870 when ashes have not been offered. Our sisters and brothers in the Roman Catholic Church are receiving ashes—but it is not possible to do so with safe distancing. Our Episcopal bishop asked us not to bless or impose them. In this, I think our bishop has been wise.

In the early centuries of the Christian Era, fasting was preparation for adult baptism. The length of time and what vesting meant varied from place to place. Sinners and heretics could be excommunicated. Along with those preparing for Baptism, the excommunicates who were desirous of readmission, would also attend the Sunday Eucharist with those who would be baptized. Both groups were dismissed after the sermon and before the prayers. In his commentary on the 1979 Prayer Book, the late Reverend Dr. Marion Hatchett, wrote that excommunicated would be readmitted to the full fellowship of the church by the bishop who prayed

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:16–18.

for them and laid hands on them: “Such readmissions were presumably a part of the Easter Vigil.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the first projects for the Roman Catholics after the Second Council was the reform of their liturgy. The work started with a study of the church year. In 1965, its first proposals included this: “The season of Lent begins on the First Sunday of Lent. The imposition of ashes can be done, depending on the judgment of the episcopal conferences”—the national groups of bishops across the world—“from Ash Wednesday to the Monday after the first Sunday.”<sup>3</sup> But Pope Paul VI did not allow for Lent to lose its first four days. Bugnini quotes the pope: “It would admittedly be difficult, and even questionable, to introduce them for the first time in our day; but now that they have been accepted by all peoples who follow the Roman Rite, it is not a good idea to suppress them.”<sup>4</sup> As far as I know, no denomination has returned Lent to its original six Sundays before Easter Day.

The Prayer Book describes Lent as a period for “self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.”<sup>5</sup>

I don’t worry much at this point in my life about losing faith in Jesus Christ. But anyone’s mind can go to a terrible place of doubt when faced with evil or tragedy. After a certain age, most of us know periods of being lost and found by faith.

I cannot remember a time when I did not know the name of Jesus. There’s still a very faint scar on my upper lip I got when I ran into a child’s chair in Sunday School when I was three-years-old.

---

<sup>2</sup> Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 218.

<sup>3</sup> Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy 1948–1975*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990), 307.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 310–11 n.2

<sup>5</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 265.

I think it was in my second year of college that, for a long while, I didn't go to church very much. Eventually a few friends talked me into going with them to a church I turned out to like very much, Saint Paul's Memorial Church, the Episcopal parish by the University of Virginia. I knew in a short time that I had found a church home.

I think our Anglican tradition at its best encourages everyone to take some real responsibility for his or her spiritual life as they are able. Last Sunday, I forgot that I was not the preacher. So, I worked on a sermon—it's still in the file.

I did spend some time on the material right before the Transfiguration. I learned I had been reading the story wrong. People bring a blind man to Jesus: "When [Jesus] had spit on his eyes and laid his hands upon him, [Jesus] asked him, 'Do you see anything?' . . . 'I see men; but they look like trees, walking' . . . Then . . . [Jesus] laid his hands upon [the man's] eyes . . . he looked intently . . . and he saw everything clearly."<sup>6</sup> I've always read the passage to mean that Jesus was "looking intently" at the blind man. No. It was the man struggling to see, wanting to see, responding to Jesus' touch.

I think it mattered for the blind man's healing that he wanted to be healed, wanted to see the man who healed him. I think it matters for our journeys and the journey of the communities to which we belong that we take responsibility, as we are able, for what happens in our lives. I'm fond of a Bowen Family Systems Theory expression—Don't worry about your feelings; just do what you know is right.

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

Copyright © 2021 The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York, New York.

All rights reserved.

---

<sup>6</sup> Mark 8:23–26