

# Ash Wednesday

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Meditation for Ash Wednesday

On Palm Sunday last year, we held fresh, green palm crosses aloft and cried out with the crowds lining the track from Bethphage to Jerusalem; *Hosanna!* Save Us!

Today, we bring these palm crosses back. They're dried out and more khaki than green. Are our hopes dried up too? We burn our palm crosses today. Does that mean we're declaring our hope dead – the hope we shared with those crowds who thought Jesus would change everything that day? Hosanna! Save us! What from?

I have a sense that burning our palm crosses is in fact a symbol of our solidarity with the one who gave his life for us – a sign that we are prepared to join him in the hopeless despair of Gethsemane if that's what it takes to be his disciple.

As we look forward through Lent to Good Friday, it's perfectly clear what we're crying for salvation from. The ashes also speak of our own death. Yet Good Friday will answer that Jesus is the one in whose death is our salvation. So maybe there's another way of seeing what our actions today might mean – burning the palm crosses, being marked with the ash, being reminded that we are dust.

We know that in six weeks' time, we'll hold fresh palm crosses aloft and cry out again to be saved. The challenge to us is to be transformed people by the time we do that – to be people willing and active in the transforming work God wants to do in and through us. The language we use in the Church is to say we die to our old self in order that God might call forth new life in us. How do we die to that old self which separates us from God, from our neighbour, from our true selves?

Lent is the season where this question is our focus. We enter the journey of Lent today – following Jesus to Good Friday. What lies before us is a journey beset with obstacles we need to overcome like temptation to self-centredness, and full of challenges we must meet like renunciation and repentance. What does this mean?

Temptation does not mean enticement in Scripture. There, the one who tempts most often, is God, and God certainly does not entice us. When God tempts, what is happening is testing, testing the faith and obedience of God's people.

And renunciation does not mean giving up chocolate or coffee. The word renounce is used at our baptism and it refers to changing our allegiance – turning from godlessness to God – choosing God.

Do you renounce Satan, evil, sinful desires?"

Renunciation is the exercise of our will *for* God. It's a positive choice.

So it follows that repentance doesn't just mean feeling sorry for the mistakes of everyday life; rather it's the right exercise of this newly empowered will – setting out on the journey in the new direction we've chosen, facing Jesus. It's a total change of perspective and direction; striking out towards a new life in a new world.

How does that work itself out in everyday life? That's what we seek on the journey of Lent. But a hint comes from today's Gospel – the first words about giving alms.

Almsgiving was the prime act of piety in Judaism – *true religion is this; to care for the widow and the orphan.* James 1.27

So Lent isn't a time of giving up, but rather giving *for* – giving for life, giving for love, giving for God. *The one who hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord.*

Jesus went first on this Lenten journey – Jesus is the one who goes before us, whom we follow. We know where his journey took him, and today, as we remember that we are dust, we commit ourselves anew to accompany him on this scary road.

Mercifully, though, we also know that because of Jesus, death is not the end of this journey. It's an end which he transformed into a new beginning – new life for those who would follow him into his Kingdom of faith, hope and love.  
Amen