

It's Ash Wednesday, the day when we fast and go to church and get a cross of ash on our foreheads. And yet in our Gospel lesson Jesus talks about washing our faces and not making a public show of our fasting. So why do we put ashes on our foreheads?

It's a good question. Why ashes?

Actually, the use of ashes has a long history. There is the ancient Jewish custom of covering yourself in ashes.

Of course, as Episcopalians, we're a little more tasteful about the whole matter. Instead of dumping ashes all over ourselves, we, settle instead for a small cross of ashes on our foreheads. But we mustn't forget the reason why we're using ashes.

The ashes are a reminder of two things:

1) They remind us of the fact that we are finite mortal creatures made of dust and ashes. We quote the line from the 3rd chapter of Genesis: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

And 2), the ashes are a sign of mourning and sorrow for the ways that we've strayed from God's intentions. Thus the ashes remind us of the need to repent of our sins.

The ashes are not a sign that we are good Episcopalians who have been to church on Ash Wednesday. If we think that, then we've missed the point of both the OT and the Gospel lessons.

In the book of the prophet Joel, God calls the people to repentance: "Even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning."

Joel's time was a time of great national crisis for Israel. The mighty Assyrian Empire was threatening them. In the midst of this international threat, God is calling the people to repentance, to return to him: "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy."

The entire nation is being called into prayer. This was even more serious than warfare. In a war, the old and the young would be exempted from combat. But God is calling all the people to repentance, even the aged and breast feeding infants. Even newlyweds, who would have a one year exemption from military service are being called into religious service.

"Even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning."

And what kind of repentance does the Lord ask? We're told:
"Rend your hearts and not your clothing."

The message is clear. God doesn't want our penitence to be only on the outside, in a torn piece of cloth, or a bit of ashes on the foreheads. God wants us to repent at our very core, at the center of our being.

Tear your hearts, not your clothing. That's the message from Joel.

Likewise, in our Gospel lesson from Matthew, Jesus cautions us about the danger of making an external show of our religion, when what God really wants is our hearts: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

Then Jesus has a long list. When you give money to the poor, don't do it for recognition. It's better to do it secretly, so that your left hand won't even know what your right hand has done. When you pray, don't do it so that you will be seen by others. Instead do it secretly, behind closed doors if you have to. When you fast, don't make a show of it. Instead look and behave normally on the outside.

Do all of these things in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

For Jesus it's a matter of priorities. Are we doing these things to impress others on earth? Or are we doing these things to offer worship to God?

If you make a big show about practicing your religion, then you will receive the reward you're looking for: people will say, "Gosh, isn't such and such a holy person."

That kind of recognition is a reward, but it's only an earthly reward. Jesus cautions us from trying to win such earthly rewards. Being changed, being penitent is not about things on the outside. Lent is not about externals. It's what's on the inside that counts.

It's not an external show that God wants. God wants internal change. During Lent, we are called to change at our very centers. We are called to rend our hearts. We are called to offer prayer. We are called to give generously to the poor. We are called to do these things for one reason only, because we love God. "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven," Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."