

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

This evening when you leave here most of you, if not all of you, will have ashes on your forehead in the shape of a cross. For some of you that is a mark that will remain there until you prepare for bed tonight, and for others it will be gone by the time you leave the parking lot.

Whether it is still visible or wiped away I pray that its meaning remains in your mind and on your heart, for it is a mark with great meaning for those who believe that Jesus Christ did suffer and die for their sins.

Ashes have a long history of use in expressions of faith.

Going back to the times of the ancient Israelites ash was a metaphor for insignificance; the insignificance of humanity. In the face of the universe's enormity human beings are but a speck of dust.

It was a sign of humanity's humility. The words human and humility like humus refers to the dirt, the origin of human existence as we find in Genesis 2.

Ashes were an agent of ritual cleansing.

God said to Abraham, "You say in your lifetime "I am but dust and ash," but just these things shall serve as a means of atonement for your children."

In ancient times a heifer is burned as an offering and the ashes are taken out to a clean place and kept for the people for the water of cleansing.

Ashes were also used in the expression of mourning throughout the Old Testament. You will find verses like this

one throughout; “he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes and went out wailing with a loud bitter cry.”

Humility, atonement and mourning all placed great significance on the use of ashes by the people of Israel, so it should be no surprise that ashes have been carried forward into the Christian understanding and expression of faith.

After all, remember that those who formed the early Christian church were Jews. They considered themselves to be messianic Jews and they brought with them much of their tradition and experience of faith.

Throughout the development of Christianity the use and meaning of ashes changed. Today it is a reminder of our mortality. Death will certainly come to us all. They also became a sign of our penitence in which there is a certain tone of mourning for our lost relationship with God and our sinfulness.

And now we approach one of the reasons those ashen crosses disappear so quickly.

Aside from being hard to explain to the curious observer, they are a counter cultural sign.

We live in a culture where
younger is better than older
More is better than less
and beautiful is better than ugly.

With all the technology, life sustaining care and all the other things in this world that would distract us, we rarely have to face our frailty and mortality, while each day we come another day closer to resembling the ash we smear on our forehead.

So how do you wear or explain a black ashen cross on your head reminding you of the death that awaits you on some

unknown day when all these cultural influences help us to ignore the inevitable?

There is another side to the use of Ashes on this day, and that is as a reminder of the sacrifice of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

This reminder causes us to look ahead, to anticipate getting through this season of Lent to that great day of celebration on Easter Sunday and the resurrection of Christ.

As we live with this daily reminder of our mortality and penitence while yearning for Easter Sunday we have the opportunity for individual and communal spiritual renewal. It is an opportunity for deepening and maturing faith and faith practices. It is a time to grow in fellowship and hospitality.

Some churches revisit the catechism. This year we will have services reflecting on various forms of brokenness of our lives and our world;

the broken vessel of ourselves, broken trust in relationships, broken bread, promises and justice.

Then we turn that brokenness over to Christ and we are be restored by him through the cross.

The cross of ashes you wear today is your reminder,
reminder of your mortality,
reminder of your penitence,
and reminder that it was Jesus who was sacrificed for you
to save you from dust and death,
and to promise you life forever.