

Prayer Letter March 2026

On Shrove Tuesday, I conducted the funeral of a very dear friend and we interred her ashes in the ground of our Memorial Garden at the end of her funeral. The next day we gathered as community to receive the ashes upon our foreheads and hear the words of the Anglican liturgy:

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Remember o mortal from whence you came and to where you return. Repent and believe the good news.

These words take on new meaning when we kneel in the dirt of the ground and pour the ashes of loved ones into the hole that has been prepared. There is something profound in pouring out the mortal remains of one we have loved into sacred ground. There is something eternal in the knowledge that nothing is lost on the breath of God for those ashes become one with the created cosmos again.

As we place ashes on our foreheads at the beginning of Lent, we are reminded that we too, will one day be returned to the earth when our mortal bodies have come to their end. The ashen cross placed on our foreheads takes on more poignancy when we are still grieving those who have died. It is a reminder of that which is no more but at the same time stirs within us a yearning to do better, be different, reflect the very best that we received from our loved ones.

There is something primal, ancient and visceral about placing dirt/ashes upon our faces. Something that is counter cultural to many of us and can be a discomfort, an awkwardness, an embarrassment. Our ashen crosses can be for us an echo of the anointing of oil we receive at our baptism.

In the Old Testament, sackcloth and ashes were a regular sight as a symbol of mourning and repentance, an act of humility. It was a strong reminder that sin had caused the person or village – the entire community often – to turn away from God and the subsequent repentance necessarily had an outward expression.

In Isaiah we read of God's impatience about the practice of bowing down the head and lying in sackcloth and ashes and asks is this the fast that God desires?

For while the outward sign of humility and repentance might be the visible sign of black ash upon the head, it is what is happening in the heart that is the important thing.

What use are ashes if the heart refuses God?

What use is irritant sackcloth if the soul is not yearning for God?

Jesus in Matthew rebukes those who express the outward signs/symbols of repentance and humility yet do not align their lives in the living out to others that God requires. God has no time for the long and public prayers of people who do not action them. God has no time for pious fasting when the hungry and the poor are not simultaneously cared for.

Isaiah says: Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

In Micah 6.8 we hear: He has shown you O mortal what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

The ashes we wear on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday are a reminder that unless our heart is changed over the 5 weeks of Lent, then we are just wearing a dirty smudge on our foreheads.

This outward sign of mourning, repentance and humility should connect with the way we determine to live out this Lent period. It is a reminder that we have an opportunity to examine our hearts and discover the things that have distracted us from the journey.

May the ashes of the start of Lent be a reminder that we are but dust and to dust we shall return. But may they also be a reminder that we are marked as God's own forever and we are each precious in his sight and beloved beyond measure.

Prayer:

May Lent be a reminder to be open to the word of God in our lives, to see clearly the distractions of life that cause a rupture in our relationship with God. May we bring our darkness into the light of God to be examined in truth.

May Lent be a reminder to turn to God rather than be distracted by the errant voices of the world. May we repent of the times we allow the world to become a barrier between us and God.

May Lent be a reminder to seek justice in the world for all the oppressed and persecuted. In mourning we open our ears to hear the laments of the world and plead to God in our prayers for the redemption of the world and all its people. Prayers that are lived out as we seek to act justly, love kindness and walk humbly.

Amen.