

Wednesday February 17<sup>th</sup>, Ash Wednesday

Good Morning from St. Bernadette's.

I hope everyone is keeping safe and well, and following all the guidance we receive to overcome these strange times, and continuing to pray for all our needs at this time.

And welcome to Lent. Welcome to six weeks of prayer, fasting and almsgiving as we prepare for our celebrations of Holy Week and Easter. In the scriptures over the next six weeks those themes of prayer, fasting and almsgiving will be given to us repeatedly from all different parts of the Bible, and along with the theme of repentance, forgiveness and the mercy of God, as well as baptism, dying to sin, and rising to new life with Christ.

Today in Joel 12:12-18 we are reminded that we are called to repentance - to make a complete conversion and change our lives around (the actual meaning of the word 'repent'). God speaks to us and asks us to come back to him - let the change be internal as well as external. He is all tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in graciousness, and ready to relent. We fast to help us make up for our sins and strengthen our will-power; *'Order a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly.'* St Paul in his Letter to the Corinthians 5:20-6:2 makes the appeal in Christ's name - be reconciled to God. Do not neglect the grace of God which you have received. *'Well now is the favourable time, this is the day of salvation.'*

And the Gospel immediately brings us to prayer, fasting and almsgiving, three great disciplines. But we are reminded that we should carry out such works quietly and modestly, and not bring attention to ourselves. *'And your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.'*

*Lord, Holy One, have mercy on us. We confess our sins to you. We have fallen short of your glory and without your mercy and grace, we would be dust. We repent now. Lord, as we enter into this Lenten season, be near to us. Help us, by your Holy Spirit, to feel right conviction and repentance for our sin. Help us, by your Spirit, to have the strength to overcome the enemy.*

*Thank you, Lord, that Easter is coming! Death has no sting, no victory, because of Jesus! Glory and honour and praise to His name! Thank you for rescuing us. Help us keep both the weight and the joy of this season in our hearts and we move through the next several weeks. Help us bear the good fruit of your Spirit.*

*Thank you that the ashes on our head do not symbolize our ultimate reality. From dust we might have been formed, but our bodies, our spirits, ourselves, await beautiful redemption and the restoration of all things. Help us long and look forward to that day, and let it come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.*

Let's start Lent with 'Be Thou My Vision', and keep our crucified and risen Lord in our vision throughout the next forty days and forty nights. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihJAJA4ibEs>

And today at our two masses we have the sprinkling of Ashes, our solemn ritual that signals the beginning of the holy season of Lent. The ceremony is distinctive; there is no liturgical action like it throughout the entire church year. The ashes come from a previous Palm Sunday, the palms being burned, the ashes collected and then crushed into a fine, sooty powder and placed into bowls, to which a little oil is added. The ashes are blessed during the Ash Wednesday Mass after the homily. This year, as with our covid-safe holy communion I will stand at the altar and say 'Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return' before donning my mask and coming down into the congregation to sprinkle a little ash on the top of people's heads

Ashes symbolize two main things in the Bible: death and repentance. Ashes are equivalent to dust, and human flesh is composed of dust or clay (Genesis 2:7), and when a human corpse decomposes, it returns to dust or ash. Ashes are an ominous sign, and we use them on Ash Wednesday to remind ourselves of our own mortality. But ashes are also a sign of us recognizing our mortality, and therefore seeking repentance, a plea to God for mercy and compassion, pardon and forgiveness. Moreover, they are a public admission of guilt, an expression of sorrow for sins that have been committed, a promise to reform and a pledge to resist temptation in the future. When we receive ashes on Ash Wednesday, we are saying that we are sorry for our sins, and that we want to use the season of Lent to correct our faults, purify our hearts, control our desires, and grow in holiness so we will be prepared to celebrate Easter with great joy.

*Lord, bless these ashes*

*by which we show that we are dust*

*and bless the sinner who asks for your forgiveness*

*and all those who receive these ashes.*

*Pardon our sins and keep us faithful to the discipline of Lent,*

*for you do not want sinners to die*

*but to live with the risen Christ,*

*who reigns with you for ever and ever.*

If you are unable to come to Church today I attach a little 'Ashes Service' which you could pray at home. And here's a photo of me covid-safe sprinkling ashes this morning.

The first set of Stations of the Cross will be available on the YouTube site from Friday.

Have a lovely day, and let us all have a lovely Lent.

Once again many thanks for all your return mails. Apologies if I don't reply immediately, sometimes they seem to get lost (or kind of bunched up). Any suggestions for ways to keep our faith and spirits up at this time are most welcome!

And remember, St. Bernadette's is not closed. We're just doing things differently for a while, until we are allowed to gather together once more, more stronger, more faithful, more loving, more creative, and more grateful for the amazing community that is St. Bernadette's.

With love and faith in Jesus.

Fr. P.