



The first day of Lent, commonly called  
Ash Wednesday.

*The Collect.*

**A**LMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hastest nothing that thou hast made, and dost forgive the sins of all those who are penitent; Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

¶ This Collect is to be said every day in Lent, after the Collect appointed for the day, until Palm Sunday.

*16 Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 17 But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; 18 That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.* Matt 6:16-18

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Season of Lent. It is a season of penance, reflection, and fasting which prepares us for Christ's Resurrection on Easter Sunday, through which we attain redemption. Why do we refer to this first day of Lent as 'Ash Wednesday?' The answer of course is that the season is one during which we contemplate the final journey of Christ to Jerusalem and eventually to the terrible Passion of the Cross, and all for our sins and not His own, for Christ was without sin.

One of the foremost American heroes General Robert E. Lee. Once, when asked by one of his men, "how often a man ought to fast?" General Lee responded, "If a man will but fast from his sins, he may eat what he pleases." Good advice. How many of us, however, are able to fast from our sins? Ashes represent mourning, but we are not to broadcast our fasting and mourning. Perhaps we would be better advised, instead of applying a little dot of ash to our foreheads for all to see, to apply them to the chamber doors of our hearts. It was OUR sins that sent Christ to the Cross. We fall woefully short of the righteousness of God, and we do so with amazing regularity.

In our personal lives, if we offend a friend unfairly, we will usually seek to avoid looking that friend in the eye until the memory of our unfaithfulness passes and we make amends. How like the habits of man in avoiding coming to the presence of God after egregious sin. We hide, as Adam in the Garden, from His presence, and we are ashamed.

The lectionary Gospel for today (Luke 15:10-32) relates the story of the Prodigal Son and, I

might add, the faithful and loving Father. The irreverent son requested his inheritance if while his father yet lived. His father, being a good father and wise, did not argue the issue but, instead, divided to his son his share of the inheritance. The profligate son received his gold and *"took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living."* (Luke 15:13) When we depart from God in our sins, we, too, go a great distance from His Love and Provision. We must also remember that when we go a far distance away, we have a far distance in returning. The young man suffered no shortage of friends during his time of plenty. But he finally spent all that he had received and began to be in want. When we are in want, we feel an immense emptiness either of heart or of stomach. And then, *"there arose a mighty famine in that land"* (Luke 15:14). Any time the Christian goes away from God (as Naomi and her family out of the House of Bread and Praise, and into Moab) there will be a famine of the Bread of Life - so with this young man.

*"And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine"* (Luke 15:15) If we are not joined to our Father and family, we will certainly be joined to some other. The stranger has no familial concern for us. He cares not whether we live or die. His only concern will be in how much use he can get from us for as little treasure as possible. This young Hebrew boy was now feeding and living with the swine – a most lamentable state for a true Hebrew. He was so hungry, he could have eaten the pig's food. He was at his lowest bar: tired, hungry, filthy, and broken. *"And when he came to himself..."* (Luke 15:17). Before there is hope of amendment, there must first come a waking of the spirit. The young man awakened to his misery and his error.

The son made a resolution while standing in the filth of the pig sty: *"I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants."* (Luke 15:18-19) When we realize our prodigality, we must resolve, first, to make amendment of our condition. This the young man did. A resolution is no legal tender unless acted upon: *"And he arose, and came to his father!"* (Luke 15:20).

His Father was a type of our heavenly Father. Once the young man left his presence, he did not pursue and plead him to return. This would have been futile and would never have caused the young man to realize his foolishness. Instead, the father kept up with reports of his son. He waited in the portal of his home watching and waiting. He watched down the same road over which his son departed. One day, he saw a figure approaching on the road as it wound out to the horizon. The person he saw was disheveled, ragged, stooped with care, and filthy. But the father was not fooled! He knew his son better, perhaps, than the son knew himself! Though he had grown old, the father ran to meet his son while he was yet a great distance away. He fell on his shoulders, embraced him, and kissed him.

Who but a father would embrace and kiss a filthy young boy who smelled of the waste of pigs? Who will receive you into His loving arms and greet you with a Holy Kiss but your Heavenly Father? The son confessed his unworthiness to be a son to his father, but his father did not acknowledge that confession out of love for his son. The old father ordered *"the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet"* (Luke 15:22) God our Father, too, provides the returning sinner with the best robe (a White Robe of Righteousness), a Signet Ring of authority, and shoes for his feet to provide him the Liberty of the Kingdom.

Our best fast today will be to turn from the ashes of our sins, and turn to God our Father, and do it without delay!

Remember the Season.