

Devotion on Ash Wednesday Collect delivered on the Saturday after the Second Sunday in Lent – 2 March 2013, Anno Domini



The first day of Lent, commonly called
Ash Wednesday.

The Collect.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hatest 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.

With this prayer, we begin the observance of the solemn season of Lent – a time in which our Lord prepared for His passion and sacrifice. There are striking examples throughout the Old Testament of the use of ashes for the purpose of fasting and repentance. The most striking is that of JOB who sat on an ash pile arrayed in sackcloth. We will discuss Job's ashes and sackcloth further in the body of this devotion. Do we all return to ashes at death? Not really, for the Bible tells us that we return to the dust of the earth, but if that dust happens to be the martyrs ashes, so be it. *All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.* (Eccl 3:20) We have the reference of "ashes to ashes" in the traditional reformation Prayer Book where we find the following preface to the committal service at the graveside: **UNTO Almighty God we commend the soul of our brother departed, and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection unto eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ, etc, etc.** Why does the Prayer Book make that reference of "ashes to ashes"? It is because the prayer Book was composed at a time when good Christian professors were actually being burned at the stake as martyrs for Christ. Not many who bend the knee at the Communion Rail are also willing to be

burned at the stake in defense of God's perfect Word, are they? What is a finger smear of ashes compared to the remains of a burned martyr? The martyrs did not provide fuel to the flame for the purpose of boasting of their righteousness – the labors of their lives was evidence of their love for God. They needed not a daub of ashes on the forehead to boast of that love and commitment. Moreover, they went to the flames for it. It was their BODIES that became ashes for Christ, not some burned palms applied by a priest's finger.

This Prayer of Collect was written by Archbishop Cranmer to replace the former prayer that emphasized fasting over repentance. Cranmer realized that more than ashes, God desires repentance: *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.* (Psalms 51:17) So the Collect goes - *ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made, and dost forgive the sins of all those who are penitent* God profits nothing by someone running about one day a year with a ridiculous smear of ash on the forehead boasting of righteousness. He would have a broken and penitent heart instead. Such a heart does not visibly SHOW its humility, but lives it. In 'The Collects of Thomas Cranmer,' by Barbee and Zahl, we are told "*The discontinuance at the Reformation of the medieval custom of sprinkling ashes on the forehead as a sign of humiliation (so clearly out of place given the Gospel appointed for the day – St Matthew 6:16-21) necessitated a new Collect.*" It is God, who looks upon the heart, that needs to see our humiliation – not other men. The emendations of the Oxford Movement (a movement which attempts to undo the blood-purchased restoration of the Gospel of the Reformation and return to the shabby rags of Rome) were renounced by the God-fearing men of the Church of England such as Bishop Ryle, Bishop McIlvaine (1st Chaplain of the US Military Academy & 3rd chaplain of the US Senate), and Bishop Burgon. These men had the good sense to believe God and not man.

How can we be worthy of obtaining mercy from God? Is it by a fashionable smear of ashes, or is it through a contrition that God can clearly see in the hidden chambers of our hearts? *Create and make in us new and contrite hearts,* Ah, yes, this is precisely what we need to be created in our hearts and not applied to our foreheads! This is why we are so different in the AOC from the ECUSA, the CoE, and all the weird Anglo-Roman churches proliferating the country. We refuse to bend the knee to Rome or to social fashion! Of what benefit will this contrite heart that God creates in us be? *"...that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness."* Forgiveness cannot be bought by an outward show of ashes, but by something that is 'broken' and that something is our hearts! The counsel of Scripture is so clearly presented on the subject that I marvel than any professing Christian could misunderstand: *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; (oops! There go the ashes!) 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) Actually, no further commentary is necessary. I consider Jesus the ultimate authority of all of Scripture for He is the Word itself!

You will recall in our study of JOB that JOB begins his suffering dressed in sackcloth and sitting on a pile of ashes. *"...he sat down among the ashes."* (Job 2:8) This gesture was perhaps contrived to present a false humility, for we read later in the text that JOB was not very humble but insisted on God being unjust and himself just. Ashes

today, especially when worn for others to see, represents that false, if fashionable, humility. Later, we find Job wearing sackcloth. What does this represent? *I have sewed sackcloth upon my skin...*(Job 16:15) This is supposed to represent his righteousness, but it had the opposite effect. Job's self-righteousness is evidenced in the sackcloth because he presumed to have a greater righteousness than even God. When we become infatuated with the outward incidentals and not the inward essentials, we will begin, like Lucifer, to believe we can be above the Lord our God, and make our own rules.

Further evidence of the uselessness, and even wretchedness of applying ashes, is found in Isaiah 58: 5 *Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, (at the Communion Rail) and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?(at least these ashes are more than a mere daub) wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD? In this verse, Isaiah is asking, "Is this what you call a fast commanded of the Lord? Is this what is acceptable to the Lord? Of course, he is referring to the Coming of Christ and His granting mercy and grace instead of law and ordinance. Then Isaiah tells us what is the proper fast of the Lord: 6 *Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? 7 Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?* (That is, be a responsible father or mother) (Isaiah 58:5-7) I can have respect for such a fast, but my opinion is not the ruling factor – it is God's Word that rules us.*

By the way, if someone feels better by rolling around in ashes and sackcloth, so be it. That is not a sin as long as it is done in the privacy of your backyard, otherwise the police might come. The point is this: Does the smearing of an infinitesimally small measure of ash on the forehead compare to sitting on a mound of ashes clad in sackcloth? And would we call all of our neighbors to witness our piety. This misses the point altogether. It rather supports the point of following the counsel of Christ in avoiding every appearance of fasting.

I believe the whole point of our Collect is that we honor God to the disregard of outward show and public custom. It is our INWARD Heart upon which God looks and not the OUTWARD forms devised by man for respectability. If I have misunderstood the counsel of God, or misrepresented His Word, then please, in accordance with your Christian responsibility, correct me for my soul's sake.