

THE OPPORTUNITY OF ASH WEDNESDAY

Thu 19 February 2015



Ash Wednesday is an opportunity for Christians all over the world to begin a pilgrimage that recalls Jesus' journey into the heart of darkness and beyond.

Putting ashes on our foreheads in the sign of the cross is a ritual that probably looks stupid to many. Who wants to wear a smudge like that at work? Who wants to go shopping with a greasy patch that everyone notices but no one wants to look at?

Ash Wednesday starts the journey towards Easter by reminding us of how Jesus came to change the world and to help humanity live differently.

He came to a world filled with violent extremists, state sanctioned torture, and obscene wealth surrounded by widespread poverty with few opportunities for children, women and men to make a life worth living. He came to a world that was bitterly segregated by wealth, race, gender and religion.

Yet he came to restore life to the sick and vulnerable. He embodied mercy by befriending outcasts, welcomed cheats and including even militants into his inner circle.

Instead of welcoming him as a friend, our world killed him but not before it beat him to a pulp and humiliated him before his family. Just to be sure, a spear was plunged deep into his chest. And the world went on as it always does.

But God did not leave his Son in the cold ground but raised him up to new life. In that Easter moment, light overcame darkness and life swallowed up death.

Ash Wednesday is the start of a 40-day journey towards Easter. It begins with an acknowledgment that we are not the perfect, flawless and blameless people we claim to be. It is a moment to admit that we too often stand with the derisive crowd, hide in fear or burnish the spear.

It is a chance to concede that Jesus challenges our assumptions, comforts and self-belief in our own goodness and rightness. Wearing the ash signals that we want to do things God's way. It shouts that we want to see what mercy, grace and forgiveness can do in our lives.

As our world ramps up for more bombing campaigns, tougher security laws and as governments twist and turn away from their responsibility to care for the vulnerable and act justly, Ash Wednesday is needed more now than ever before.

We try to fix the world through more violence, more legislation and more education. Ironically, these things never seems to get to the heart of the matter. We can feel bewildered and angry that Jesus left so much that was so wrong in place.

But Jesus destroys his enemies, not by killing them but by turning them into friends. It was the only way to get through to the soldier who killed him and its the only way to get through to us too. We too are deeply invested in world that is bitterly segregated by wealth, race, gender and religion.

The striking, bewildering and overwhelming reality is that only those who are complicit in such systems can change them. Jesus changes the world by changing our hearts. So let us wear the ashes confident in God's forgiveness and power to make peace and reconciliation a reality, today and everyday.

By Archdeacon **Wayne Brighton**