

Ash Wednesday 2025

Although it is not among the readings chosen for Ash Wednesday, there is a passage in Jeremiah which speaks very well to such new beginnings and hope in God's mercy:

"I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare, not for woe; plans to give you a future full of hope. When you listen to me, when you go to pray to me, when you look for me, you will find me with you, says the Lord; and I will change your life."

When you came into church today, as so often, you probably dipped your fingers into the holy water and made the Sign of Cross. This action is always a reminder of our Baptism, when the priest or deacon who was to baptize each of us said in welcome: **"The Church of God receives you with great joy"** and marked our forehead with a Cross. In Baptism, God first changed our lives by making us living Members of the Body of Christ.

On Ash Wednesday, we are marked in that same place on our foreheads with the ashes. We think about how our lives since Baptism have experienced suffering, struggle, temptation and troubles, and even our sin that contradicts who we are in Jesus. But that Cross remains a sign of love, of mercy, of the unfailing faithfulness of God who accompanies us even in our failures and leads us to joy.

Recalling how we were welcomed with joy takes us back to another celebration of great joy, when Jesus entered Jerusalem and the crowds greeted Him with palm branches, strewn on the road and waved like banners to welcome the Messiah. But only six days later, He was on the Cross. The branches had no doubt been gathered up, probably burned, a vivid sign of that hopeful joy now gone, laying in ashes.

The ashes we use each year, of course, come from previous year's palms that are burned. This is a vivid symbol of the hopes and ideals we held as disciples of the Lord, all too easily squandered away by sin and selfishness, indifference and the overwhelming moments of life when we turn away from Christ to follow some other light and fire, and our spiritual lives seem to turn to dust and ashes.

But the ashes of the old palms become the sign of a new beginning; and what was dust becomes the foundation to build anew. As Jesus lay in the dust of the earth in death, and rose to new life on Easter, so too the old can give way to the new for us. ***This Lent, we will strive to pray more regularly and devoutly; deny ourselves, and grow in charity for others.*** To transform our long-established habits and patterns, things that hinder our growth as followers of Jesus, we need to pick something significant as our Lenten focus to improve upon. That means we may well fail to change in 40 days, but we persevere in hope and in trust that though WE fail, God's mercy never fails.

These ashes point us back to the joy we once knew, welcomed to life with Christ, But they also point ahead to the joy awaiting us, as Jesus Himself welcomes us returning to Him, the members of His body, with freedom and integrity of life. Today, His Word assures us: *"I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare, not for woe; plans to give you a future full of hope.*