

Ash Wednesday Liturgy of the Ashes

This liturgy may be led by a priest or by a lay person.

Opening Song

The liturgy begins with a song. The song should introduce the theme of Lent or gather the people as a worshipping community seeking forgiveness for sin and conversion of heart.

Introduction

The leader of the liturgy begins:

Let us begin our prayer together . . .

In the name of the Father, + and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen.

Either the leader or someone else should introduce the liturgy using these or similar words:

Today we gather,
with Christians across the world,
to mark the beginning of the holy season of Lent.
Today is Ash Wednesday.
God calls us to repentance,
to bring our sins and burdens before him
and ask his healing
and forgiveness.
What have you to bring?
What do you ask forgiveness for?
What in you needs the healing of Jesus Christ?
In stillness, we come into the presence of the God
who is always forgiving,
always merciful,
always compassionate,
always loving.

Here pause for a few moments in silence.

Collect (Opening Prayer)

Let us pray.

Lord,
as we begin this holy season of Lent,
may we turn back to you with all our hearts,
in prayer,
in fasting,
and in giving alms to the poor;
that our sins be forgiven
and our hearts mended.
Through our Lord, Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

All: Amen.

Scripture Reading

Joel 2:12-18 (JB)

A reading from the prophet Joel.

‘Now, now (is the Lord who speaks), come back to me with all your heart, fasting, weeping, mourning.’ Let your hearts be broken, not your garments torn, turn to the Lord your God again, for he is all tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in graciousness, and ready to relent. Who knows if he will not turn again, will not relent, will not leave a blessing as he passes, oblation and libation for the Lord your God? Sound the trumpet in Zion! Order a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly, call the people together, summon the community, assemble the elders, gather the children, even the infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his bedroom and the bride her alcove. Between vestibule and altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, lament. Let them say, ‘Spare your people, Lord! Do not make your heritage a thing of shame, a byword for the nations. Why should it be said among the nations, ‘Where is their God?’” Then the Lord, jealous on behalf of his land, took pity on his people.

The word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

A Dramatized Version of the Joel Reading

Joel 2:12-18 simplified (JB)

Reader 1 A reading from the prophet Joel.

God Now, now . . .

Reader 2 It is the Lord who speaks!

God Come back to me with all your heart,

[getting quieter and slower . . .]

fasting,
weeping,
mourning.

Reader 3 Let your hearts be broken, not your garments torn,

Reader 1 turn to the Lord your God again,

Reader 2 for he is all tenderness and compassion,
slow to anger,
rich in graciousness,
and ready to relent.

Reader 3 Sound the trumpet in Zion!

Reader 1 Order a fast!

Reader 2 Proclaim a solemn assembly!

Reader 3 Call the people together!

Reader 1 Summon the community!

Reader 2 Assemble the elders!

Reader 3 Gather the children, even the infants at the breast!

Reader 1 Let the bridegroom leave his bedroom
and the bride her alcove.

Reader 2 Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord,
lament.

Let them say . . .

Readers 1 + 3 Spare your people, Lord!

Reader 2 Then the Lord, jealous on behalf of his land . . .

God *[God steps forward and pauses before speaking, as though
thinking about this]*

. . . took pity on his people.

Reader 1 The word of the Lord.

People **Thanks be to God.**

Psalm

Psalm 50:3-6, 12-14, 17 (Grail)

Response: **Have mercy on us, O Lord, for we have sinned.**

Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness;
in your compassion blot out my offense.
O wash me more and more from my guilt
and cleanse me from my sin.

Response: **Have mercy on us, O Lord, for we have sinned.**

My offences truly I know them;
my sin is always before me
Against you, you alone, have I sinned;

what is evil in your sight I have done.

Response: Have mercy on us, O Lord, for we have sinned.

A pure heart create for me, O God,
put a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
nor deprive me of your holy spirit.

Response: Have mercy on us, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Give me again the joy of your help;
with a spirit of fervour sustain me,
O Lord, open my lips
and my mouth shall declare your praise.

Response: Have mercy on us, O Lord, for we have sinned.

The Gospel

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 (JB)

Praise to you, O Christ, king of eternal glory!

A pure heart create for me, O God,
and give me again the joy of your help.

Praise to you, O Christ, king of eternal glory!

A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew.

Jesus said to his disciples, 'Be careful not to parade your good deeds before men to attract their notice; by doing this you will lose all reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give alms, do not have it trumpeted before you; this is what the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win men's admiration. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you give alms, your left hand must not know what your right is doing; your almsgiving must be secret, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites: they love to say their prayers standing up in the synagogues and at the street corners for people to see them; I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you pray, go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you. When you fast do not put on a gloomy look as the hypocrites do: they pull long faces to let men know they are fasting. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that no one will know you are fasting except your Father who sees all that is done in secret; and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.'

The gospel of the Lord.

All: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

There follows a homily or reflection on the readings and the significance of Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent.

Blessing and Distribution of Ashes

After the homily, the leader stands and says:

My friends in Christ,
let us ask God our Father
to bless these ashes
which we will use
as the mark of our repentance.

Pause for a moment of silent prayer.

Father,
we gather in your presence on this Ash Wednesday,
to seek your forgiveness
and to ask your help in living our lives better.
For the times when we have failed to love: have mercy, Lord.
For the times when we have not noticed the needs of others: have mercy, Lord.
For the times when we have refused to forgive: have mercy, Lord.
These ashes are a sign of our repentance.

Holding a hand outstretched over the ashes . . .

Bless them, Lord,
and make them a sign to the world of our desire to change,
and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus your Son.

All: Amen.

The ashes are sprinkled with holy water in silence.

Ashes are placed on the heads of all those present with the words:

Repent and believe in the gospel.

or

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

A song is sung, or instrumental music played, during the distribution of ashes.

Universal Prayer (Bidding Prayers)

All stand for the bidding prayers. The response (Lord, have mercy) could be sung.

Leader: As we begin this season of Lent, let us pray for ourselves and for the whole world that all people may come back to God, repenting their sins, and seeking his forgiveness.

Reader: Let us pray that we may hear God's call this Lent to come back to him, asking his mercy and forgiveness. Lord, have mercy.

All: Lord, have mercy.

Reader: Let us pray that, when we lose confidence in ourselves, in others, and in God, we may be blessed with the gift of faith. Lord, have mercy.

All: Lord, have mercy.

Reader: Let us pray that, when we are tempted to despair, we may find hope. Lord, have mercy.

All: Lord, have mercy.

Reader: Let us pray that, when our hearts are filled with anger and resentment, we may find compassion and love. Lord, have mercy.

All: Lord, have mercy.

Leader:

As we forgive those who sin against us,
let us ask for God's mercy
in the words that Jesus taught us:

All: Our Father, who art in heaven . . .

Blessing and Dismissal

The leader prays:

Let us pray.

Father,
through our observance of Lent,
help us to understand the meaning
of your Son's death and resurrection,
and teach us to reflect it in our lives.
Through Christ our Lord.

All: Amen.

Go out marked with the ashes of repentance.

Go out marked by faith in God's mercy.

Go out marked by hope in God's forgiveness.

Go out marked by love for all God's people.

All: Thanks be to God.

Alternative Readings

Any of the following could be used as alternative scripture readings to replace the reading from Joel given above. The gospel reading should always remain the reading appointed for Ash Wednesday (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18).

Tobit

Tobit 4:14, 16-17, 19-20 (JB)

A reading from the Book of Tobit.

Be careful, my child, in all you do, well-disciplined in all your behaviour. Do to no one what you would not want done to you. Give your bread to those who are hungry, and your clothes to those who are naked. Whatever you own in plenty, devote a proportion to almsgiving; and when you give alms, do not do it grudgingly. Ask advice of every wise person; never scorn any profitable advice. Bless the Lord God in everything; beg him to guide your ways and bring your paths and purposes to their end. For wisdom is not given to every nation; the Lord himself gives all good things. At his will he lifts up or he casts down to the depths of the dwelling of the dead. So now, my child, remember these precepts and never let them fade from your heart.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Hosea

Hosea 14:2-10 (JB)

A reading from the prophet Hosea.

Israel, come back to the Lord your God; your iniquity was the cause of your downfall. Provide yourself with words and come back to the Lord. Say to him, 'Take all iniquity away so that we may have happiness again and offer you our words of praise. Assyria cannot save us, we will not ride horses any more, or say, "Our God!" to what our own hands have made, for you are the one in whom orphans find compassion. I will heal their disloyalty, I will love them with all my heart, for my anger has turned from them. I will fall like dew on Israel. He shall bloom like the lily, and thrust out roots like the poplar, his shoots will spread far; he will have the beauty of the olive and the fragrance of Lebanon. They will come back to live in my shade; they will

grow corn that flourishes, they will cultivate vines as renowned as the wine of Helbon. What has Ephraim to do with idols any more when it is I who hear his prayer and care for him? I am like a cypress ever green, all your fruitfulness comes from me. Let the wise man understand these words. Let the intelligent man grasp their meaning. For the ways of the Lord are straight, and virtuous men walk in them, but sinners stumble.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Ezekiel

Ezekiel 36:22-28 (JB)

A reading from the prophet Ezekiel.

The Lord God says this: I am not doing this for your sake, House of Israel, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I mean to display the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned among them. And the nations will learn that I am the Lord (it is the Lord God who speaks) when I display my holiness for your sake before their eyes. Then I am going to take you from among the nations and gather you together from all the foreign countries, and bring you home to your own land. I shall pour clean water over you and you will be cleansed; I shall cleanse you of all your defilement and all your idols. I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead. I shall put my spirit in you, and make you keep my laws and sincerely respect my observances. You will live in the land which I gave your ancestors. You shall be my people and I will be your God.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 5:18-6:2 (JB)

A reading from the second letter of St Paul to the church at Corinth.

It was God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation. In other words, God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding men's faults against them, and he has entrusted to us the news that they are reconciled. So we are ambassadors for Christ; it is as though God were appealing through us, and the appeal that we make in Christ's name is: be reconciled to God. For our sake God made the sinless one into sin, so that in him we might become the goodness of God. As his fellow workers, we beg you once again not to neglect the grace of God that you have received. For he says: At the

favourable time, I have listened to you; on the day of salvation I came to your help. Well, now is the favourable time. This is the day of salvation.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Ephesians

Ephesians 4:17-24, 29-32, 5:1-2 (JB)

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Ephesians.

Brothers, I want to urge you in the name of the Lord, not to go on living the aimless kind of life that pagans live. Intellectually they are in the dark, and they are estranged from the life of God, without knowledge because they have shut their hearts to it. Their sense of right and wrong is dulled. Now that is hardly the way you have learnt from Christ, unless you failed to hear him properly when you were taught what the truth is in Jesus. You must give up your old way of life; you must put aside your old self, which gets corrupted by following illusory desires. Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution so that you can put on the new self that has been created in God's way, in the goodness and holiness of the truth. Let your words be for the improvement of others, as occasion offers, and do good to your listeners, otherwise you will only be grieving the Holy Spirit of God who has marked you with his seal for you to be set free when the day comes. Never have grudges against others, or lose your temper, or raise your voice to anybody, or call each other names, or allow any sort of spitefulness. Be friends with one another, and kind, forgiving each other as readily as God forgave you in Christ. Try, then, to imitate God as children of his that he loves and follow Christ, loving as he loved you.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Readings from the *Jerusalem Bible* (1966)