

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning.

Audience:

Morning.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Welcome to our daily service of morning prayers. Good to see that you all survived the historic snowstorm, none the worst for wear. I invite you, please to rise and join on our responsorial psalm, which is number 70 in your black psalter. Be pleased, oh God, to deliver me. Oh God, make haste to help me.

Audience:

Let those who seek my life be ashamed and altogether ashamed. Let those who take pleasure in my misfortune fall back and be disgraced.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let those who say to me, aha and gloat over me turn back because they are ashamed.

Audience:

Let all who seek you, rejoice and be glad in you. Let those who love Your salvation and say forever, praise be the Holy One.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

But as for me, I am poor and needy. Come to me speedily, oh God.

Audience:

You are my help and my rescuer. Oh God, do not delay.

Chorus:

(singing).

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

This is a reading from the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, beginning at the 16th verse. "Whenever you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast put oil on your head and wash your face so that your fasting may be seen not by others, but by your Father who is in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." Here ends the lesson.

Today, February 14th is the Feast of Saint Cyril and Methodius, believe it or not. I spoke on Cyril and Methodius last year, the Apostles to the Slavs. Popularly, it's also the Feast of St. Valentine, but this year, it's Ash Wednesday. And since I'm not preaching at the noon service or at communion tonight, Valentine is going to have to wait until another year.

Ashes were commonly used as a sign of grief and repentance in the Hebrew Bible. There's a long tradition in the Bible of ashes as a sign of penitence and of grief. And Christians continued it. It became the custom for those who had committed sins and had been expelled from the community, before they were allowed to return to the community, they were usually welcomed back on Easter Day. For 40 or so days before Easter, they would be dressed in sackcloth and ash and be penitent. This was true in the second and third century and afterwards.

Over time, this 40-day season became a season of penance and fasting, not just for those who were waiting to be welcomed back into the community, but for everyone. And so, they would mark the beginning of the season by sprinkling ash on people at the beginning of the 40 days. By the end of the 10th century, it was customary for Christians throughout Western Europe to receive ashes on the first day of Lent, which is today.

Rome adopted the practice in 1091 and named it Ash Wednesday. And here we are. We will offer ashes today at 12:15 in a special service and also with the 5:15 communion service. And as you walk around wherever you may be walking around today, you will surely see folks with ashes on their foreheads. You won't see me with ashes on my forehead because in this gospel passage, Jesus tells me to wash my face. So I'm going to do that.

But if I'm honest, as I am washing my face, I will tell you the spiritual crisis I will be having. I'm going to be worrying that it's because maybe I don't want my faith to be so public. I worry in general too much about what people think of me. And given the reputation of Christianity in our world today, and maybe especially in Cambridge, it's not always comfortable to walk around with ashes on your forehead or with a collar around your neck. So I admit there may be something of the coward and apostate in me.

But be that as it may, I still believe that what we will do here today when we receive ashes, it's not for others, it's for us. The ash on our forehead is not a sign to others that we are Christian. It's not even a sign to us that we are Christian. Rather, it is what we say it is. It's a sign that we are mortal. Remember, you are dust. And when you see others with ashes on their foreheads, it's a reminder that they too are mortal.

The first time I imposed ashes on my kids' foreheads, I had to catch my breath because I realized the truth of what I was saying as I said it. We are human and finite and vulnerable, and each of us is subject to suffering. God knows that's true and Jesus does too, which is sort of the claim of our religion. And also, I think why the basic command of our religion is to love. When I caught my breath putting ashes on my kid's foreheads, it was not just fear and grief, but love that welled up in me.

And if we precious humans were all totally invulnerable, we wouldn't need to love one another. Alas, that's not what we are. We are dust. And so, love is what we've been given to manage all our common and mutual vulnerability. Elsewhere in the New Testament, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says that we show others that we are Christian by our love. Not by the crosses on our foreheads, not by the collars around our necks.

If I'm worried sometimes, as I often am, that I'm not living my faith publicly enough, the answer maybe is not to put ashes on our foreheads. It's to go and love our mortal neighbors with our mortal hearts. I hope that you will spend your Ash Wednesday and your Lent happily doing so. I invite you please to rise for the prayers. The Lord be with you.

Audience:

And also with you.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us pray. Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all 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 you the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness through Jesus Christ, our Lord who lives in reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Audience:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

And now let us say the words Jesus taught us, praying, our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Audience:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Please join in our closing hymn, number 143, 40 Days and 40 Nights.

Chorus:

(singing).

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

We will gather downstairs after this service for Mem Cafe and also, once again, services with imposition of ashes today at 12:15 and at 5:15. Grant, most merciful Lord, to your faithful people, pardon and peace that they may be cleansed from all their sins and serve you with a quiet mind. And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be among you all and remain with you always. Amen.

Audience:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us bless the Lord.

Audience:

Thanks be to God.