

Ash Wednesday

Prayer

God of mercy and truth,
we come as we are.

Not to perform goodness,
not to prove ourselves,
but to be honest in your presence.

Quieten the noise within us.
Settle what is restless.
Untangle what is hard and defensive.

When we choose comfort over compassion,
turn us towards justice.

When shame clings to our skin,
speak your gentler word.

When we have harmed neighbour or earth,
teach us to put things right.

Hold us in this beginning,
earth to earth, breath to breath,
and shape in us a truer life:
quiet in love, courageous in action, wide in welcome.

Through Christ, who reconciles and renews, we pray.

Ashes and Turning

Ash Wednesday is an honest doorway. It does not ask us to pretend we are fine, but invites us to tell the truth about our lives, our communities, and the world. It calls us into a turning that is sober without being cruel, and hopeful without being shallow. Ashes speak of limits and endings, but also of beginnings: the clearing of what is false, and the returning of what is real. This is not self-punishment. It is coming home.

Threads to explore

- Honesty without shame
- Turning towards God and neighbour
- Faith without performance
- Mortality, humility, and shared dignity

Context

Joel speaks to a people shaken and complacent, calling them to return to God with their whole selves. Psalm 51 gives words for honest confession, not as self-hatred, but as a longing for a renewed heart and a steadier spirit. Paul urges the church to receive grace in the middle of real life, reminding us that faith is not performance but trust that holds through hardship. In Matthew, Jesus challenges spirituality done for attention, and invites practices that are quiet, truthful, and rooted in love.

Connections

These readings invite us into repentance as a turning, not a spectacle. They name what is real in us, our limits, our distractions, our longing, and they refuse to let shame be the final word. Together they hold mercy and change side by side: forgiveness that restores, and a new way of living that becomes

visible in generosity, prayer, and justice. Ash Wednesday begins Lent by bringing us back to what matters, and allowing space for making things right.

Deepening the Word

Ash Wednesday is often treated as a private reset, a moment of personal guilt. The readings press wider. They call for honesty together, and for faith that shows up as repair. Jesus offers relief to anyone exhausted by trying to look good: you do not have to prove your faith. You are invited to be real. Giving becomes generosity without applause. Prayer becomes honest, not something we put on. Fasting becomes clarity rather than a way to prove ourselves, a way of noticing what we cling to, what keeps us numb, and what we excuse.

This kind of turning shows up wherever people move from image to action: when a community treats accessibility as part of welcome, not an optional extra; when unfairness is named plainly, including racism, sexism, transphobia, poverty, and harm to the earth; when budgets, rotas, leadership, and language change to widen belonging; when apologies are paired with changed behaviour; when climate grief becomes steady, practical choices.

Offer this day gently. The word “repentance” has been used to shame and control, and talk of bodies, food, or discipline can be painful for many. Frame the invitation as kindness and courage: come home, and begin again.

Discussion

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Jesus invites a quieter faith, shaped by love rather than image. What matters is not what people see, but what is true: where our attention goes, what we value, and what kind of people we are becoming.

Questions:

- What comes to mind when you hear the word repentance, and what would help make it more meaningful?
- What makes it hard to be honest about your limits (with yourself, with others, with God)?
- Jesus cautions against “faith for show”. What might honest faith look like where you are?
- What competes for your heart right now: approval, security, productivity, comfort, status?
- What might repentance look like for a community, not just for individuals?
- What is one small act of turning you could practise this week, towards God, towards someone else, towards justice?

Call to Worship

Truth is welcome here.

Mercy is not withheld.

This is a day for returning – without spectacle, without shame.

Let us turn towards the Holy One
who makes room for honest hearts,
and begins again with us.

Adoration

God of steadfast love,
you meet us in truth, not pretending.
You are the quiet courage
that helps us face what is real.

You are mercy without conditions,
compassion without calculation,
welcome that does not shrink
when our stories get complicated.

You do not delight in shame.
You do not feed our fear.
You draw near with a kindness
that tells the truth and heals.

You keep opening new beginnings,
not as denial, but as renewal.
You re-create what is worn down,
you strengthen what is fragile,
you widen what has been made narrow.

We adore you,
source of life,
Spirit of truth,
Christ our peace.
Hold us in your love.

Confession

God of compassion,
we confess that we often choose appearance over truth.
We hide our mess, defend our comfort,
and mistake being busy for being faithful.

Forgive us when we ration mercy,
when we justify harm,
when we stay silent to protect what benefits us.

Forgive us when we accept unfair systems as “just how things are”,
when we overlook those already carrying burdens,
when we make access optional instead of part of love.

Turn us again.

Make us brave enough to tell the truth,
and gentle enough to begin again.

Intercessions

Optional response

God of renewal,

hear our prayer.

Holy One,

we bring you our prayers with honesty, for the world you love.

For all who carry grief, anxiety, exhaustion, or pain,
and for anyone whose faith has been bruised by harsh religion,
bring tenderness and practical support.

For those facing hunger, homelessness, debt, or precarious work,
for families living under cruel policies,
for migrants and displaced people seeking safety,
stir justice in those with power, and solidarity in us.

For all harmed by violence in homes, institutions, streets, and nations,
for survivors seeking safety and healing,
bring protection, accountability, and peace that is real.

For the earth and all who suffer the cost of climate breakdown,
for land and sea under strain,
for communities already paying the price,
teach us to put things right, with urgency and care.

For your Church,
that we may practise faith without performance,
welcome without caveats,
and repentance that becomes transformation.

Receive these prayers,
and shape us for mercy, courage, and renewal.

Thanksgiving

Generous God,
we give thanks for mercy that meets us in reality.
For love that does not flinch
when we name what is true.

We give thanks for second chances,
for the slow work of mending,
for communities learning to listen,
for courage that keeps showing up
even when change costs us something.

We give thanks for companions on the road,
for those who hold space without judgement,
for those who tell the truth in love,
for those who make room for others to breathe.

We give thanks for signs of renewal,
quiet and ordinary:
a softened heart,
a repaired relationship,
a widened welcome,
a just decision,
a small act of solidarity.

Receive our gratitude,
and keep shaping us in love.

Blessing

Go gently from this place.
Not to prove your goodness, but to practise truth.

Take what you need: a slower breath, a quieter pace, a steadier yes.
And when you falter, let grace meet you without shame.
In the love of Christ, and the companionship of the Spirit,
go in peace.

Visual

- Create a simple Ashes and Water station near the entrance: a shallow bowl of ashes, a bowl of water, and a short sign such as “Truth and mercy”.
- Lay a short path of turning into the worship space using grey cloth, stones, or battery candles, leading towards a cross or a simple candle of light. Keep it wide and step-free, with no trip hazards.
- Place a jar of earth and something green (soil with a small sprig or shoot) somewhere visible, as a quiet sign of dust and new beginnings – “from earth, towards life”.

Creative

- **Release and Receive:** Two baskets and small cards, one for what to release, one for what to practise.
- **Ashes of Illusion:** Write a “false script” you are tired of living, tear it up as prayer.
- **Mending Map:** A simple local map with sticky notes naming where mending is needed and where hope is growing.
- **Table of Turning:** Stones, thread, and paper to make a small token to carry through Lent.
- **Mercy Wall:** Anonymous prayers posted, later covered with a cloth labelled “Mercy holds this.”

- **Justice Seed Pockets:** Seed packets (or paper “seed promises”) with one small justice practice for the week.

Meditation

Based on Joel 2; Psalm 51; Matthew 6

Ashes are small, ordinary things,
what felt solid becomes soft in the palm.
We come today not to be shamed,
not to be crushed by our limits,
but to tell the truth in a space held by mercy.

God does not ask for polished hearts.
God asks for real ones.

So we bring what is heavy:
the harm we have caused
and the harm we have excused,
the habits that keep us numb,
the ways we chase approval,
the stories we tell ourselves
to avoid change.

And we listen for the gentler invitation:
Come back.
Not with a performance.
Not with sorrow designed to be seen.
Come back with all you are,
including the part of you
that is tired of pretending.

Let this be a turning:
from image to honesty,
from self-protection to compassion,

from despair to the stubborn hope
that mending is possible.

Teach us, God, to choose what matters,
to treasure people over status,
to practise justice without needing credit,
to become a community
where repentance looks like making amends
and mercy looks like change.

Hold us at this threshold,
earth to earth, breath to breath,
and let this day be what it is:
not an ending,
but a turning towards life.

Performance

A Two-Voice Litany: “Not for Show”

Voice 1: We come with ashes, not as a badge, but as truth.

Voice 2: We come with empty hands, not to earn love, but to receive it.

V1: When we hide behind image,

V2: return us to honesty.

V1: When we cling to comfort,

V2: return us to compassion.

V1: When we speak of peace,

and ignore the wounds in our streets,

V2: return us to justice.

V1: When prayer becomes performance,

V2: return us to honesty.

V1: When fasting becomes pride,

V2: return us to clarity.

V1: When shame tells us we are beyond hope,

V2: return us to mercy.

V1: When we close our eyes to the harm we benefit from,

V2: open us to truth that leads to change.

V1: God of renewal, meet us in the secret places of the heart

V2: and make us new, for the sake of the world you love.

Practice

A daily turning

Set aside a small moment each day and treat it as a threshold. You might do this while the kettle boils, before you open your phone, on the bus, or at the end of the day when the house is quieter. Find a posture that supports you: sitting, standing, lying down, or moving gently. Keep your eyes open or closed, whatever feels safest.

Breathe in and say in your heart, “Mercy meets me here.”

Breathe out and say, “Help me turn towards love.”

Without judging yourself, name one truth about today: a feeling, a worry, a regret, a kindness, or a heaviness you are carrying. Hold it in God’s presence for a moment, without rushing to fix it. Then choose one small turning you can practise before the day ends. Keep it small enough to be real: a message of apology, a boundary, a rest you actually take, an act of kindness, a check on accessibility, a moment of listening without defensiveness.

End simply with: “Hold me in grace as I begin again.”

Digital

- Post a simple prompt: “One thing I’m letting go of – one thing

I'm practising.” Invite one-sentence replies.

- Share a short line as text-on-image: “Honesty. Change. A fresh start.”
- Start a thread: “Small acts of making a difference” – everyday steps people are taking to put things right (at home, work, or in the world).
- Invite photos of thresholds (doorways, paths, sunrise) with: “Turning is a beginning.”
- Share a gentle explainer: “Ash Wednesday starts Lent for Christians – a day for honesty about life, and choosing a new direction.”

Explore

Ash Wednesday begins Lent with an invitation to be honest and to begin again. The readings speak about returning to God with our whole selves, asking for a renewed heart, and choosing practices that shape us in love rather than image. For someone new to faith, it helps to emphasise that “repentance” simply means turning – choosing a new direction, away from what harms and towards what gives life. This day is not about punishment or pretending to feel the right things. It is a gentle start: truth, mercy, and a new beginning.

Discover

- Joel calls a whole community to return with honesty, not show, and to make space for change.
- Psalm 51 is a raw prayer for mercy, asking for a renewed heart and a steadier spirit.
- Paul speaks of grace that is lived out, and of making things right

with God and one another.

- Jesus teaches that prayer, giving, and fasting are meant to be real and quiet, not done for attention.
- Together, these readings begin Lent with truth-telling that leads to mercy, restoration, and a new way of life.

Reflect

Ash Wednesday says you do not have to prove yourself to God. You can be truthful about your limits and still be loved. Turning is not about becoming perfect. It is about becoming real, and letting mercy reshape how you live. Even small acts of making amends matter, because they make space for trust to grow again, in you and in your community.

Connect

You might see this turning when someone apologises and changes, when a group widens welcome, or when a community chooses accountability over blame. Small acts of mercy and justice are how new beginnings take shape.

Think

- Where do you feel pressure to look “fine”, even when you are not?
- Take a moment to notice what you are carrying today – and let yourself be honest about it.

Do

Choose one Lenten action “in secret” today: give quietly, pray briefly, or let go of one small habit that feeds image. Tell no one. Afterwards, pause and notice what it feels like to be real rather than impressive.