

Ash Wednesday

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

(Matthew 16:24)

What is the Ash of Ash Wednesday?

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Lenten season 46 days before we reach Easter. It is 40 days (the 6 Sundays in the season aren't counted) of re-treading those well worn paths that lead with an inevitability to the suffering of Calvary and the joy of an empty tomb.

To mark the beginning of our journey we traditionally mark our heads with Ash. Have you ever wondered where the Ash comes from? The ash is made from the palm crosses of the year before. They are ceremoniously burnt and the ash collected in preparation to begin our journey through Lent. This emphasises the circular nature of our journey.

Our Lenten journey is one we follow anew each year where we follow Jesus' journey as he turns his face to Jerusalem and his ultimate purpose. We follow that journey for 40 days, re-telling and re-living the story, each year the same path and yet each journey is different.

If you were to read Mark's Gospel from beginning to end (it's not very long so well worth doing one afternoon) you might discover a clever narrative device at the end which gives an insight into the Christian life. If you take the last few verses of the shorter ending (the Longer ending was added some centuries later) we end with the discovery of the empty tomb and a figure who tells the disciples not to be afraid, that the Jesus they are looking for has been raised and goes ahead of them to Galille where they will see him (Mark 16:5-7).

Rewind now to the beginning of Mark's Gospel and start reading again. There in the very first chapter, in verse 14 you will find yourself in Galillee once more as Jesus comes to proclaim the Good News (Mark 1:14-15). The journey is circular. The Christian life is circular. Every time we meet the Risen Christ we are sent back to the beginning to start our journey again. But it is different, each time it is different. Although the path is the same, the journey is changed because we are changed. Changed by our experiences on the way and by the encounter with the divine.

The use of the Palm crosses to mark our heads with ash emphasises the circular nature of our journey, we remember last years journey, we bring to mind our encounter with the risen Christ and we prepare ourselves to journey those same well trod paths knowing that we have changed over the last year and we enter the same story again as different people.



Why Ash?

There are various reasons why we use ash. There are many cases of ashes being used in the Old Testament, such as Daniel 9:3-6. It was used as sign of repentance, a sign to demonstrate to God and to others that we recognise our faults, that we are sorry and want to change and to be changed. It is a recognition of our fallen nature and our longing to become more fully what God intended, *Imago Dei* (made in the image of God).

We receive the ashes with the words '*Remember that thou art dust and unto dust thou shall return*'. This is a reminder that as sons of Adam we are all formed from the dust of creation by God (Genesis 2:7), and this same dust is used by Jesus to heal us (remember Jesus healing the blind man with mud in John 9:6). It also reminds us of our mortality, that our earthly desires will end, but because Jesus lived as one of us and rose again, so we will live on beyond our earthly life and desires.

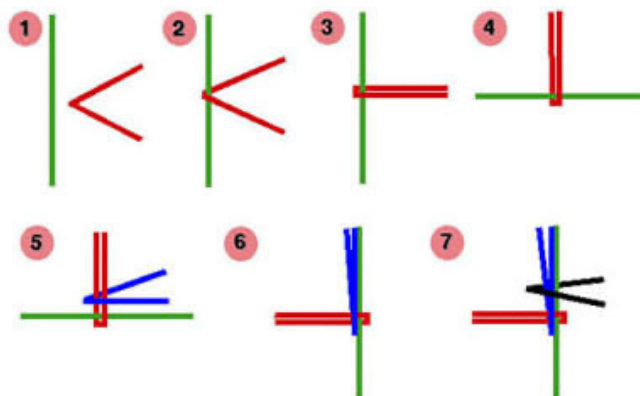
With Covid restrictions we can't use Ash, so how will we mark the beginning of our journey this year?

"When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." (Luke 9:51)



This past year has been marred by an absence of human contact and touch and it means we can not mark our foreheads with Ash as we would normally do. But marking the beginning of our journey through Lent is an essential part of our faith, a day of obligation for all Christians to mark. So how will we do it this year? This year I am inviting you to join me in making a St Bridgid Cross. This is a simple cross which we can weave. Traditionally it is made of reeds, but you can use anything you have to hand. If you haven't got any

reeds or similarly pliable plants in the garden then cut some strips of paper, or like me, you can use pipe cleaners. You'll need 20 or so 20-30cm long lengths. To make the cross you can follow these steps below or follow the link to youtube for a video tutorial. <https://youtu.be/bq0ci42PnLc>



1. Hold one of the reeds vertically. Fold a second reed in half as in the diagram.
2. Place the first vertical reed in the centre of the folded second reed.

3. Hold the centre overlap tightly between thumb and forefinger.
4. Turn the two rushes held together 90 degrees anti-clockwise so that the open ends of the second reed are pointing vertically upwards.
5. Fold a third reed in half and over both parts of the second reed to lie horizontally from left to right against the first straw. Hold tight.
6. Holding the centre tightly, turn the three reeds 90 degrees anti-clockwise so that the open ends of the third reed are pointing upwards.
7. Fold a new reed in half over and across all the rushes pointing upwards.
8. Repeat the process of rotating all the rushes 90 degrees anti-clockwise, adding a new folded reed each time until all rushes have been used up to make the cross.
9. Secure the arms of the cross with elastic bands. Trim the ends to make them all the same length. The St Bridget's Cross is now ready.

As you weave the cross try to clear your mind of distractions, reflect on your journey over the last year, think of how you've changed and been changed by your experiences and your encounters and prepare to enter the story afresh as we turn, with Jesus our faces to Jerusalem.

From Dust thou Came...

'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24)

Once you've made your Bridgid cross it's possible to place seeds within the weaves. I'm using sweet pea seeds as something that is easy to grow but any seeds you like will do. You can then put your cross in the churchyard or if you can't get to a churchyard by walking, put it in your garden (you might need to find a small stick to peg to the ground). These seeds will germinate and grow (hopefully!) throughout our Lenten journey and at Easter we should have churchyards full of flowers growing from our crosses. This is symbol of our mortality, our death and resurrection, but also a symbol of our journey. We let our old ways fall to the ground and die and from this we find God growing within us, changing and shaping us to bring beauty and colour to those around us and our world.



Food for the journey...



Once you've planted your cross you can come and visit it once a week during our journey through lent and spend a few minutes in prayer and meditation talking to God about our journey with Christ. One such meditation is something called the 'Examen' which has been used by faithful Christian's for centuries to talk to God about their lives and ask His help and guidance. As we journey through Lent you might like to use this as a way of reflecting upon your journey, marking your progress and working towards growing closer to God as you journey with him through this season.

The following Examen ask us about whether we are free or unfree. We are spiritually free when our spirutal and emotional state of being is healthy, when we are desirous of being faithful, hopeful and loving. We are spiritually unfree when our negative emotions and temptations have gotten the better of us. When we are too angry, sad, tempted or scared to think straight.

As you aproach your planted Bridgid Cross each week, spend a few moments making yourself aware of your surroundings, let God make his precense known in all that surrounds you and within you. Spend a few moments thinking of the past week since you were last here. Thank God for one or two of the blessing, big or small, that you have received in that time.

Now, focussing on one arm of the Bridgid Cross, look back on the week that's been. Ask God "What was my most unfree moment?". That is, at what moment was I being carried away by my own fears, resentments, cravings, addictions, anxieties or despairing thoughts?

In you prayerful imagination, return to that specific moment. Imagine God and yourself watching that moment together, side by side. God and you watch as your heart fills to the brim with the negative emotion that wept you away.

Focussing on the second arm of the Bridgid Cross, speak to God. Speak to him about what you saw, ask God for his forgiveness, or maybe for healing. Allow God to show you his perspective of the situation.

Is there anything that you sense God is trying to tell you about this? Talk with him about it and acknowledge your deepest emotions about it.

As you focus on the 3rd arm of the Bridgid Cross, look back again at the week. Ask "What was my most spiritually free moment?. In which moment did I feel and act free from negativity, low and earthly thoughts and emotions? At what point did I feel most alive and most in sync with God?

Focussing on the 4 and final arm of the Bridgid Cross, imagine yourself with God watching that grace-filled moment. Replay the moment in you prayerful imagination. Observe not only what happened, but also what was gong on deep in your heart. Speak to God about this and allow Him to show you his perspective. Talk about it with God for a while, celebrate that moment with Him.

As you turn your focus to those seeds planted in the weave of the Cross, look with God to the week ahead of you. How can you journey into this next week and live out of that freedom that you felt in last weeks grace filled moment? What attitudes and behaviours will you need to adopt to avoid the pull of the unfree moment? What is God calling you to do to live in spiritual freedom?

Make whatever commitments you feel called to make. Ask for God's help to keep those commitments.

Bring your Examen to an end as you widen your focus to encompass God's precense all around you and within you and say the Diocesan Lent Prayer.

**Sovereign Lord,
all our beginnings and endings are encompassed by you.
Help us to follow in the footsteps of Christ
And seek your Kingdom with all our hearts.
In Jesus, may we find firm footing for our feet
And clear direction to our travels.
With his life and love breathed into our witness,
May we stand with him,
Who, for the joy that we set before him,
Endured the Cross. Amen.**