

Today is Ash Wednesday.

Not all denominations observe Ash Wednesday. In the protestant world it is mainly Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists and Anglicans. But it is observed by Christians for probably more than 1600 years and it is observed across the globe. On this day we remember our mortality and we repent anew of all our sins. This contemplation drives us to Saviour Jesus and through considering his suffering over the next 40 days, we are assured of salvation and of eternal life!

Cleanse me from my sin.

After Advent and Christmas until today, we considered the Gospel as it was revealed through the teaching, miracles and ministry of Jesus.

But today is Ash Wednesday. Today the Season changes to Lent. This Season, that lasts till Good Friday on 2 April, leads us into an even deeper understanding of the Good News of God. It should lead us from knowing about Jesus, to loving and following him wholeheartedly.

This is to a certain extent is a dark journey in which we confront the strongholds of evil in our lives, deeply ashamed of what we became without the discipline of being followers of Christ.

But it also is a journey in which the cross, the suffering and the grave of Christ grant us hope, forgiveness and a deep sense of joy about the love, grace and the mercy of God.

Ash Wednesday is the point which marks the change of seasons, leading us into the deepest possible personal knowledge of God's love, revealed in giving his only Son, that we will not perish, but have eternal life. And on Ash Wednesday we confront the evil and sin in us, to prepare us for our journey with Christ on his way of suffering, while we all the time learn to love him more and become more devoted to him.

In Psalm 51 David begs God to cleanse him, after his adultery with Bathsheba is exposed by Nathan the prophet.

Psalm 51: 2 -4 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.

On Ash Wednesday we, like David, realise that sins that are not repented of and turned away from, carry within them the evil energy of self-destruction and often harm others. When the Holy Spirit convicts of sin, and we turn back to God on the grounds of his love, grace and mercy, repentance becomes a journey of receiving back life, and the freedom to choose to serve and worship God with all our heart, soul and mind.

The way God offers is neither easy nor comfortable and is one that calls for spiritual discipline. Even though Ash Wednesday is a day of solemn repentance when we recognise that we are sinners in need of a Saviour, it is also a day in which we rejoice that we are rescued from the slavery of sin and restored as children of God.

When we begin the symbolic journey of following Jesus through forty days of fasting, spiritual discipline and resistance to temptation, called the Season of Lent, we already know about his victory and exultation through his resurrection and ascension. Repentance therefore becomes the means towards a closer walk with God, looking forward to his gracious purpose with our lives and to be with Christ forever. But before we begin to create the Christian life and world we long for, we have to admit our sin: our greed, our carelessness, our ignorance, our self-centredness, our idolatry and our destructive consumption, amongst other things.

David only repented after he was confronted by the prophet Nathan. But should we not daily practice repentance, even before we are challenged by someone else, about what we have done?

Ash Wednesday offers us the opportunity to start to develop a spiritual discipline where repentance drives us to Christ, and as such influences all our relationships. How rich in love, obedience, humility and faith we will become, if we take Ash Wednesday's call to repent home, to stay with us always!