

ASH WEDNESDAY AND ASHES



Matthew 6:1 Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Ash Wednesday is here and most people who attend services on this day also practice the ritual imposition of ashes as a part of the liturgy. This custom is nearly universal among Roman Catholics and Anglicans, and is very widely practiced among Lutherans, and surprisingly, is becoming more and more common among Presbyterians and other evangelical bodies. Because of this relatively large consensus, it is easy to assume that the ritual and the day stand or fall together. That is, to observe Ash Wednesday simply *is* to impose ashes upon the congregation. Indeed, the ashes have become so important that at my former church in Bridgeport on Ash Wednesday people from the

neighborhood would come and knock on the parish office door, all afternoon and to ask for "their" ashes, when they had no time or interest in attending the service! So, it is easy to assume that the imposition of ashes has always been the crucial element of this day.

The use of ashes was indeed known in communal demonstrations of humility in the ancient world. We see this, for example, in the Old Testament itself, as people sit in or cover themselves with ashes as a symbol of mourning and repentance (Esth. 4:1, 3; Job 2:8, 42:6; Dan. 9:3; Jon. 3:6). No doubt inherited, at least thematically, from the Jewish practice seen in the Old Testament, the ceremonial use of ashes in the Christian church, however, does not really arise until much later. We have early fragmentary evidence of the use of ashes for penitential rites, as well as various sorts of consecrations with ashes, but a more normative and uniform use of ashes at the beginning of Lent, cannot be documented until after the year 1050 of the Common Era, about 1,000 years after the death of Jesus. Though this must have had a gradual prior development, it is nonetheless also limited to the Western Christian churches. "Ash Wednesday" services, as we know them, are not typically practiced among Eastern Orthodox congregations.

This use of ashes would continue in the West for the next four hundred more years until the Protestant Reformation. Within

the first decade of that disruption, however, ashes began to be discarded by both the Reformed and Lutheran churches. In England, the Reformation among Anglicans would be a bit slower in developing. In 1542, the pro-Reformation theologian Thomas Becon still endorsed the imposition of ashes in the Ash Wednesday services of the English churches. Five years later, however, Thomas Cranmer ordered the practice to cease, and that date is important because the publishing of the first English Book of Common Prayer had not yet occurred. In fact, the imposition of ashes is not included in *any* Anglican Book of Common Prayer until the American 1979 BCP.

So, if the imposition of ashes was still uncommon and unofficial in the 1950s and 60s among many Christians, how and why did it find its way into the American 1979 Book of Common Prayer, and then soon afterwards in the 1986 English *Alternative Service Book*? The answer would initially appear to be a long march of nonconformity on the part of Anglo-Catholic and ritualist ministers and parishes, whose worship guides would suggest the use of ashes at the beginning of Lent as was then done in the Roman Church. Still, the celebrated ritualist writer Percy Dearmer does not discuss the imposition of ashes in the 1899 edition of his *The Parson's Handbook*; however, by 1907, only 8 years later, he is willing to suggest in a footnote that "The ceremony of the taking of ashes might well be revived,

where it is allowed. It is a touching and simple rite."

Evidently, the controversy had sufficiently cooled down as we entered the 20th century.

Still, ashes do not make their way into any official Prayer Books at that time, not for another 80 years at least! Instead, they begin showing up in various "alternative" liturgical manuals, such as the 1921 *Anglican Missal* and the 1931 *American Missal*. It is also important to note that what these ash ceremonies involved was significantly different from the contemporary practice. In the *Anglican Missal*, there is a prayer for blessing the ashes where it is implied that the ashes were "sprinkled" upon the heads of the recipients and that the ashes possess something akin to a sacrament. As such, this sort of practice was far from the mainstream. Neither the 1979 nor the 2019 America editions of the Book of Common Prayer contain this sort of prayer, and neither give this explanation for the ashes. So, while it may be tempting to see the re-emergence of ashes as the triumph of advanced Anglo-Catholic ritual, a better answer is still found elsewhere.

The more "mainstream" explanation for the return of ashes is that these changes were more immediately caused by the ecumenical liturgical movement sparked after the second Vatican Council. This is likely also why Lutheran churches begin to introduce the imposition of ashes, along with other rites and

ornaments, at this same time or shortly thereafter. The use of ashes today thus is a post-Vatican II consensus of Roman Catholics, mainline Protestants, and more recent adherents to liturgical renewal.

Nevertheless, the practice of the imposition of ashes as a part of the Ash Wednesday service is now extremely widespread. Among Anglicans in North America, it is certainly the norm. It would be far easier to count those parishes that do not practice it rather than those who do. This is true even among ecclesiastical groups with a "low church" and Evangelical heritages. But this is a tradition which has a surprisingly short pedigree. Owing neither to the "Caroline divines" or the "Old High Churchmen," the widespread imposition of ashes in churches today, other than with Rome, represents only a late twentieth century development.

This history can teach us several things, but chiefly it highlights how traditions can be invented and re-invented—and how quickly and thoroughly this can happen. Certainly, most laymen assume that the use of ashes is an ancient and unbroken custom, and many a church website advertises it as such. One suspects the opinion is not much different among the clergy. In point of fact, however, the practice of the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday is fairly new.

The relationship between the past and the present is a frequently recurring question in the Christian tradition. Still, with any decision about practice and identity, we need to first accurately know and understand the past traditions, and then come to understanding that today the imposition of ashes is a merely sign of our mortality and of our penitence as we begin the season of Lent. AMEN.