

ASH WEDNESDAY – ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS
5 MARCH 2025



Joel 2.1-2, 12-17 / 2 Corinthians 5.20b – 6.10 / John 8.1-11

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

 In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – Amen

SOME YEARS ASH WEDNESDAY comes to us with *fields* of daffodils and clear sunlit skies, and spring's warm breath cheering us on gentle breezes. *Those* years one has to work hard to convey the sense that repentance and the confession of sins *matter*, urgently. The pleasant weather, reinforced by the relief from winter's tedious grey chills, incline even the most pious hearts to thoughts of languorous summer days and the good spirits shared by friends and family strolling across green fields.

This is not one of those years. The sub-zero mornings drain some of the joy from sunny afternoons, and the grim news day after day lends a gloomy cast to thoughts about whether any of what we care about will last through the next year. This Ash Wednesday comes to us as a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, with attendants whose scowling visage reminds us that this is indeed a world in which sin and falsehood make their all too dangerous presence felt. This year, Ash Wednesday reminds us about hard-heartedness, about battlefields and graveyards, of rubble where once children played, and muted crowded camps where bazaars once sang out haggling offers in mercantile counterpoint. This year's Ash Wednesday comes heralded by blowhards and deceivers, and we can't escape the sense that better days lie further away from us than any of us would like. This, my friends, is a serious year for serious fasting and repentance.

This year the pre-Lenten readings at Morning Prayer might as well

have been torn from the pages of a non-partisan newspaper (if we could find one) reporting on whatever bile the most recent controversy has stirred up among the people who clamour to make themselves heard on air and online. We have indeed left undone the things we ought to have done, and we have done the things that we ought not to have done, and draw your own conclusions from that.

Even in this dismal excuse for political and climatic stage dressing to create an appropriate Ash Wednesday atmosphere, though, even these grim days cannot prevail against the inevitable, gradual, incremental victory of hope over cruelty. The power of hope is grace, God's own grace, which outlasts greed by giving, ever giving more, and eludes tit-for-tat petty destructive vengeance by God's open-hearted forgiveness. Hope, grace, forgiveness, *love* will always endure where vice and deception exhaust themselves.

Waiting for hope's fulfilment, waiting for Easter, asks much of us. But it does not ask more than we already devote to self-indulgence, or self-justification, or self-deception. Hope doesn't ask that we give up the *good* in life — but it does ask that we *share* it, that we yield the notion that some of the good is *ours* such that others can't have *any*. Hope puts to shame the tendency for desires to make themselves seem like *necessities*, and for necessities to go unthanked, unappreciated, as though they come to us by our own deserving. Hope asks us honestly to take stock, to repent of selfishness and to spread hope in all our paths. Hope inspires us to begin living today as we hope to live in God's presence forever, not grasping and hoarding, not bickering and back-biting, but revelling in simple gifts and joying in offering to our sisters and brothers. Hope springs not in the *human* breast but in *God's Spirit* indwelling our hearts — and for us to know hope, to feel hope from our scalp to the hard worn soles of our feet, the *only* way to feel the truest, deepest hope comes from kindling hope in others, nurturing hope in other hearts,

feeding the blaze of hope that bursts forth when humility and generosity prevail over vanity and greed.

If current events and recent weather lend their bleak aspect to this evening's devotions, we push back against that grey curtain of gloom by *acknowledging* our errors, our complicity, our inactivity in the face of evil's banal predations. We *push back* by confessing the simple, plain truth that we can do better, and by training ourselves by fasting and renunciation to take on inner austerities so that our neighbours and the very world itself can *breathe* and *rest* and *renew* its strength. We push back against ingenuous evil with purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God, and we will *never* lose by staking *everything* on God's powerful love.

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on the holy mountain! Let *all* the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near. When you hear that clarion call, when you hear the summons to come forward and acknowledge your sins, rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is *gracious* and *merciful*, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Blow the trumpet in Zion: be reconciled to God. For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

Blow the trumpet in *Abingdon*! *Ring out* the bells that sing of God's truth and God's glory, of God's love and God's forgiveness. Ring the bells by the riverside: sanctify a fast! Ring the bells towering over the Market Square — call a solemn assembly! Ring the humble bells on Park Road, bells that — humble as they may be — will summon the prayers of St Helen, the benevolence of St Nicolas, the surging power of St Michael and *all the angels*, will summon the invincible holiness of Our Lady, Refuge of Sinners, so that surrounded, encouraged, inspired and

empowered by this great cloud of witnesses, we may faithfully *repent* and *return* to the LORD; who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him?

✠ In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit —

Amen