

# Sunday Message

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

THE WORD

Year B • 18 February 2024 • Psalter Week 1

## DUST AND A CROSS

MARK 1:12-15



Mark's account of Jesus' temptation in the desert is shorter than those of Matthew and Luke. Mark simply records that Jesus went into the desert to do battle with Satan, and that he emerged victorious forty days later to begin his ministry.

Still, for Mark, as for the other Gospel writers, Jesus' time in the desert is of crucial importance. This is the time when Jesus steps back from the world to think, to pray, and to discern what God wants him to do. It is the time when he gets the measure of his enemy - Satan.

In the desert, Satan desperately tries to get Jesus to betray his mission. He hopes to steer Jesus from the path of salvation planned for him by the Father, and to follow Satan's way rather than God's way. But all Satan succeeds in doing is helping Jesus to clarify his mission.

Now Jesus is ready to become God's spokesman. He tells people that the time has come to let God rule in their lives. It is time to believe the Good News.

Just as his forty days in the desert helped Jesus to focus on his mission, and to test his commitment to his Father, the forty days of Lent is that time when we are called to look more closely at our relationship with God, and to confront the power of darkness that prevents us from letting God rule in our lives. ■

### DO

Lent is a time for prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Traditionally, Christians fasted and shared what they saved with the poor. This Lent, keep a record of what you save as a result of your fasting, and give it to charity.

### PRAY

Pray for the Church this Lent, for the renewal it needs, so that it can give more effective witness to Christ.

### SAY

"Lord, give me a spirit of repentance during these 40 days so that I can become the kind of person you want me to be."

### LEARN

Lent originally began on the first Sunday - and not on Ash Wednesday - giving six weeks of Lent with six fasting days (excluding Sunday). In order to bring the number up to 40, additional days from Ash Wednesday onwards were included, and Ash Wednesday became the 'official' beginning of the Lenten season.

## REFLECT

Several years ago, then American Vice President Joe Biden was attending a news conference in Washington. Biden had a large, dark mark on his forehead, and journalists at the event noticed it. The Sky News presenter back in London was especially curious. After the news conference ended, she asked Sky's Washington correspondent if he knew what had happened to the vice president. Did he have a fall? Had he bashed his head against something? The correspondent didn't know but promised to find out. A few minutes later, back on air after an ad break, the suitably abashed presenter apologised for not realising it was Ash Wednesday and the blob on Biden's forehead was the ashes he had received at Mass that morning.

Not very long ago, especially in Catholic countries, it would have been impossible to not know when Ash Wednesday had come round. Almost everyone wore ashes, often the darker and more prominent the better. People were happy to wear them as they

went about their business, going to work or to the shops. They wore them as a sign of faith and penance.

Sadly, that is no longer the case, and fewer people wear the ashes than even a decade ago. Which is a pity because the little ceremony of the ashes is a beautiful, powerful ritual that eloquently describes what the season of Lent is all about, indeed what life is all about for people of faith: dust and a cross. Our foreheads are marked with dust in the form of a cross. There are several formulae that can be used when the ashes are applied. One of the most common says: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

Dust reminds us of our nothingness. It is the symbol of coming to nothing, as the German theologian Karl Rahner, once described it. Dust has no content, no form. We find it everywhere. It is anonymous, useless, shapeless, valueless. And yet dust is what we are.

The ashes placed on our foreheads remind us that we are dust. From the moment we are born, we are in the process of dying. No matter how rich, powerful, fit, healthy, significant or seemingly indestructible we are, we will die one day. Our bodies will become dust.

But, thank God, that is not the whole story. Because the dust placed on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday is done very deliberately in the shape of the cross. The symbol of the cross reminds us that we are redeemed people. Yes, we will die one day, we will encounter setbacks and pain and loss, we remain dust, but the sign of the cross is a statement that death is not the end of our dust. The Son of God took on flesh like ours, and became dust on a cross to save us from sin and bring us to salvation. The cross is the symbol of our redemption.

Dust and cross bookend our Lenten journey. Dust and cross also tell us Christians all that we need to know. ■

**ENTRANCE ANTIPHON**

**When he calls on me, I will answer him;  
I will deliver him and give him glory,  
I will grant him length of days.**

**COLLECT**

Grant, almighty God,  
through the yearly observances of holy Lent,  
that we may grow in understanding  
of the riches hidden in Christ  
and by worthy conduct pursue their effects.  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of  
the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.  
**Amen.**

**FIRST READING**

Genesis 9:8-15

A reading from the book of Genesis.

God spoke to Noah and his sons, 'See, I establish my Covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; also with every living creature to be found with you, birds, cattle and every wild beast with you: everything that came out of the ark, everything that lives on the earth. I establish my Covenant with you: no thing of flesh shall be swept away again by the waters of the flood. There shall be no flood to destroy the earth again.'

God said, 'Here is the sign of the Covenant I make between myself and you and every living creature with you for all generations: I set my bow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of the Covenant between me and the earth. When I gather the clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, I will recall the Covenant between myself and you and every living creature of every kind. And so the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all things of flesh.'

The word of the Lord.  
**Thanks be to God.**

**PSALM**

Psalms 24 (25):4-6, 7b-9

Response:

**Your ways, Lord, are faithfulness and love  
for those who keep your covenant.**

1. Lord, make me know your ways.  
Lord, teach me your paths.  
Make me walk in your truth, and teach me:  
for you are God my saviour. **(R.)**
2. Remember your mercy, Lord,  
and the love you have shown from of old.  
In your love remember me,  
because of your goodness, O Lord. **(R.)**
3. The Lord is good and upright.  
He shows the path to those who stray,  
He guides the humble in the right path,  
He teaches his way to the poor. **(R.)**

**SECOND READING**

1 Peter 3:18-22

A reading from the first letter of St Peter.

Christ himself, innocent though he was, died once for sins, died for the guilty, to lead us to God. In the body he was put to death, in the spirit he was raised to life, and, in the spirit, he went to preach to the spirits in prison. Now it was long ago, when Noah was still building that ark which saved only a small group of eight people 'by water', and when God was still waiting patiently, that these spirits refused to believe. That water is a type of the baptism which saves you now, and which is not the washing off of physical dirt but a pledge made

to God from a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has entered heaven and is at God's right hand, now that he has made the angels and Dominations and Powers his subjects.

The word of the Lord.  
**Thanks be to God.**

**GOSPEL ACCLAMATION**

**Praise to you, O Christ, king of eternal glory!  
Man does not live on bread alone,  
But on every word that comes from the  
mouth  
of god.  
Praise to you, O Christ, king of eternal glory!**

**GOSPEL**

Mark 1:12-15

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark.

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness and he remained there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan. He was with the wild beasts, and the angels looked after him.

After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. 'The time has come' he said 'and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News.'

The Gospel of the Lord.  
**Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.**

**PROFESSION OF FAITH**

**I believe in God,  
the Father almighty,  
Creator of heaven and earth,  
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,**

*(all bow during the next two lines)*

**who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died and was buried;  
he descended into hell;  
on the third day he rose again from the  
dead;  
he ascended into heaven,  
and is seated at the right hand of God the  
Father almighty;  
from there he will come to judge the living  
and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and life everlasting.  
Amen.**

**PRAYER OVER THE OFFERINGS**

Give us the right dispositions, O Lord, we pray,  
to make these offerings,  
for with them we celebrate the beginning  
of this venerable and sacred time.  
Through Christ our Lord.  
**Amen.**

**COMMUNION ANTIPHON**

**One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes forth from the  
mouth of God**

**PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION**

Renewed now with heavenly bread,  
by which faith is nourished, hope increased,  
and charity strengthened,  
we pray, O Lord,  
that we may learn to hunger for Christ,

the true and living Bread,  
and strive to live by every word  
which proceeds from your mouth.  
Through Christ our Lord.  
**Amen.**

**PRAYER OVER THE PEOPLE**

May bountiful blessing, O Lord, we pray,  
come down upon your people,  
that hope may grow in tribulation,  
virtue be strengthened in temptation,  
and eternal redemption be assured.  
Through Christ our Lord.  
**Amen.**

Lent stimulates us to let the Word of God  
penetrate our life and in this way to know  
the fundamental truth: who we are, where we  
come from, where we must go, what path we  
must take in life.

*Pope Benedict XVI*