

### *A Prayer that Began in the Ashes*

Luke 23:34

Let us pray: God, the Lord of life, by the blood and water of Jesus Christ found in your word, wash away the wounds of our souls and the afflictions of our bodies. Shape our lives so that not a moment nor a resource is wasted, but all are used in service to you. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Brothers and Sisters, today is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent. Lent is not merely a time for observing a church season. It is a time to look again at the life of Jesus through prayer, discipline, repentance, and reflection, and to walk slowly, day by day, the path that he himself walked, right in the midst of our ordinary lives.

For that reason, Lent is a time to accept again who we are before God, before asking what we should do.

That is why the church does not begin this journey with explanations of what we will learn, nor with resolutions about what we will accomplish. Instead, the church begins with the physical act of receiving ashes. With our bodies, we acknowledge that we are dust and stand honestly before God.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This is not a declaration that we are worthless. Rather, it is a truthful confession that we cannot save ourselves.

Ash Wednesday speaks to us of two truths. First, that we are sinners before God. Second, that unlike God, we are finite beings, destined to die.

The confession that we were formed from dust does not speak only of death that will come someday. It reveals how fragile our lives truly are. We want to love, yet we do not love fully. We desire to live justly, yet we fall short. We long to embrace and welcome others, yet often our hearts and our wills do not follow through.

At precisely this point, Scripture speaks to us: if the life of God does not dwell within us, we are like ashes easily scattered. Thus, Lent is not a season to prove that we have become better people, but a season to acknowledge that we are still people in need of grace. And that grace is revealed with clarity in the very first prayer spoken from the cross.

The crowds cried out, "Crucify him," yet even in unspeakable agony Jesus pleaded with God the Father for their forgiveness: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (NRSV).

The early Church father **Augustine** reflected on this scene in this way. Jesus prayed on the cross as a human being, and as God he heard that prayer. More than that, Augustine says, Jesus did not pray only then. Even now he prays within us as our great high priest. As our head, he prays for us, and as our God, he hears our prayers.

The prayer of the cross is not merely an event of the past; it is a prayer that continues even now. As Jesus looked upon those who delivered and nailed him to the cross, he already foresaw that many of them would become friends of God. For this reason, he did not seek revenge, but interceded for them.

Then who are the "they" for whom Jesus prayed? Were they the soldiers who nailed him to the cross? The people who mocked him? The disciples who remained silent? The early Church answered this question clearly: "We, too, are included among them."

Jesus said, "They do not know what they are doing." This is not a statement that excuses their sin, nor is it a declaration of innocence. It is a profound insight into the human condition.

**Augustine** explains this phrase by saying that their not knowing was blindness. Yet here is the astonishing truth. The very blindness that nailed Jesus to the cross was healed by the blood that flowed from that cross. When we were blinded by sin, Christ did not condemn us. He became our physician who heals us. The ashes speak to us, "You are sick." But the cross says, "Christ heals you."

Jesus' prayer was truly answered, and even now that prayer continues to be fulfilled. In Acts 2:36, when Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, he declared, "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." At that moment, three thousand people repented and believed.

Among them were those who had taken part, directly or indirectly, in the crucifixion of Jesus. They came to Peter and asked, "What should we do?" Hands stained with blood were transformed into hands that received grace. Jesus' prayer was not in vain.

Brothers and sisters, today we receive ashes on our foreheads. The ashes speak to us and say, "You are not enough." "You are weak." "You are finite." Yet Ash Wednesday does not leave us there. Before those words are spoken, there is another word that comes to us from the cross: "Father, forgive them."

We have not come here today to prove that we deserve forgiveness. We have come to learn again where that forgiveness leads us. Forgiveness does not leave us where we are. Forgiveness sets us on the path to reconciliation with God.

As **Stephen** was being stoned to death, he prayed just as Jesus had prayed: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Those who receive the forgiveness of Jesus are transformed into people who forgive others. And through Stephen's prayer, another fruit was borne, a man named **Paul**. Stephen's prayer was not merely a beautiful example. It is a living testimony to how the forgiveness of Christ shapes one soul after another.

As 2 Corinthians 4:7 tells us, we are earthen vessels, yet we carry within us the treasure that is Christ, "so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." The Christ who has forgiven us is now anointing us with the power of forgiveness and calling us to be instruments of healing in this world.

Brothers and sisters, Ash Wednesday is not a day of judgement, but the day when forgiveness begins. As you receive ashes on your forehead or your hand, may you hear the voice of the Lord who forgives you. His voice delivers us from condemnation, softens our hearts, and renews our lives. May this be a time when you are anointed not only to forgive yourselves, but also to forgive those who have wronged you. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, we thank you that before we knew you, you first knew us and loved us first. On the cross, you interceded for us, and through your death, we have received forgiveness. Anoint us with the power of your forgiveness, that through us the gospel of the forgiveness of sins may be proclaimed. In your gracious name. Amen.