

A Service at Home for Ash Wednesday

This service is designed for you to use at home at any time of day during Ash Wednesday. It uses many of the same prayers and structure as the new Ash Wednesday rite. Use it in any way that suits you best. Adapt as you need or wish to. Our only advice is that if you wish to cut the number of readings, please keep the Psalm and the Gospel.

If using this as a family or worshipping online as a group, the text in **bold** should be said together. Substitute “*We/our*” for “*I/my*” as needed. Instructions and questions are in *italics* and should not be said aloud.

Introduction

You may wish to light a candle as you say:

I come to you, O Merciful God, with my sorrows and my failings, my joys and my strengths.

Lord, I turn to the light.

The Litany

God the Father,
have mercy on us.

God the Son,
have mercy on us.

God the Holy Spirit,
have mercy on us.

Holy, blessed, and glorious Trinity,
have mercy on us.

From all evil and mischief:
from pride, vanity, and hypocrisy:
from envy, hatred, and malice:
and from all evil intent.
good Lord, deliver us.

From sloth, worldliness, and love of money:
from hardness of heart
and contempt for your word and your laws,
good Lord, deliver us.

From sins of body and mind:
from the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil;
from error and false doctrine,
good Lord, deliver us.

In all times of sorrow,
in all times of joy:
in the hour of death,
and at the day of judgement,
good Lord, deliver us.

Govern and direct your holy Church: fill it with love and truth:
and grant it that unity which is your will.
Hear us, good Lord.

Give us boldness to preach the gospel in all the world, and to
make disciples of all the nations.
Hear us, good Lord.

Enlighten your ministers with knowledge and understanding,
that by their teaching and their lives
they may proclaim your word.
Hear us, good Lord.

Give your people grace to hear and receive your word, and to
bring forth the fruit of the Spirit.
Hear us, good Lord.

Bring into the way of truth
all who have erred and are deceived.
Hear us, good Lord.

Strengthen those who stand:
comfort and help the faint-hearted:
raise up the fallen;
and finally beat down Satan under our feet.
Hear us, good Lord.

Give us true repentance:
forgive us our sins of negligence and ignorance
and our deliberate sins:
and grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit
to amend our lives according to your holy word.

Holy God
Holy Strong
Holy Immortal
Have mercy on us.

Readings

Joel 2.1-2,12-17

2 Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—
² a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
 a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
 nor will be again after them
 in ages to come.

¹² Yet even now, says the Lord,
 return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
¹³ 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,
 and relents from punishing.
¹⁴ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
 and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain-offering and a drink-offering
 for the Lord, your God?

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
¹⁶ gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
 assemble the aged;
gather the children,
 even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
 and the bride her canopy.

¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar
 let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep.
Let them say, 'Spare your people, O Lord,
 and do not make your heritage a mockery,
 a byword among the nations.

Why should it be said among the peoples,
“Where is their God?” ’

Psalm 51

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgement.

⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶ You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right* spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing* spirit.

¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶ For you have no delight in sacrifice;

if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.

¹⁷ The sacrifice acceptable to God* is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

¹⁸ Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,

2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10

²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

⁶ As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ² 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! ³ We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷ truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Matthew 6.1-6,16-21

‘Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.’ ² ‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵ ‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁶ ‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁹ ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Reflection

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, a season of reflection and penitence. It is not an easy season. It asks us to confront our sinful nature and see how far we have wandered away from God. It is an uncomfortable, challenging experience, and it is supposed to be.

But why should we be so discomfited? After all, in the secular world, “sin” is all around us. Rugby players are sent to the “sin bin”. Perfumes are marketed with names like “Red Sin”. There are cocktails themed on the Seven Deadly Sins. A well-known diet even divides the world into “free” food and “sin” food. Sin is no longer something serious. It just means something a wee bit naughty. It has little meaning for most people. When most secular people do think of sin in a Christian context, they associate it with guilt, shame, and oppression.

And that is because often, under the banner of Christianity, the word “sin” has been weaponised. It turns into a malicious word designed to cause hurt and pain, dressed up in concern for the state of one’s soul. “Sin” in this context is a way of telling someone “I dislike what you do/who you are, and therefore so does God.” And because those who use the word “sin” to wound others do so loudly and repeatedly, that is the version of “sin” that secular society often associates with Christians.

But misusing “sin” to cast judgement on others is nothing new, and in Matthew’s Gospel there are people who probably sound very much like people you know. Those who love to show off their displays of charity with a trumpet call. Those who pray loudly so that others can hear them being holy. Those who want you to know how much they are suffering with their fasting. Jesus dismisses them all with a simple “They already have their reward.” In other words, these not-so-pious people are seen by others as pious and gain recognition for it. They have got what they wanted – the attention and adulation of others.

Jesus instead urges us to be secretive. An odd choice of words perhaps, given that we usually associate secretive behaviour with sinful behaviour. But here secretive lacks malicious connotations. It just means doing something quietly and without fuss. So what does this have to do with Lent, and what we do with the word “sin”?

Jesus, in advising secrecy, is advising us to stop measuring sinfulness by external measures determined by our peers. Instead, sin is about looking in upon ourselves. It’s about asking where we have gone wrong, and how we can move into a better relationship with God. And because no person is perfect, and none of us has a perfect relationship with God, we can’t judge others or be judged by others. We can only be judged by God. And so, we don’t need to prove to anybody that we are praying. We just pray. We don’t need to grimace and gurn when we fast. We just fast. It’s enough that God knows we are moving towards him. That’s the treasure in heaven we build up.

Because ultimately, if all we find are our faults and failings, we’re stuck as sinners. We’re hopeless and helpless. But when we find our faults and failings, and then offer them to God, we move from sinner to saved. So maybe Lent, in all its challenge and discomfort, is joyous in itself. We are sinners. We turn to God. We are saved.

What struck you while you were going through today’s readings? Did you find any of it difficult to relate to yourself?

What springs to mind when you hear the word “sin”? Why do you feel this way about the word?

Is there anything you want to focus on during Lent this year? Talk with God about the blessings and challenges that lie ahead in the next 40 days.

Prayers

**Almighty God,
Creator of heaven and earth,
we confess that we have sinned
in thought, word, and deed.**

**We have not loved you with all our being,
we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves:
we have disfigured your image in which we are made.**

**In your mercy, forgive what we have been
and what we have done,
guide us and help us to amend our lives,
and bring us to fullness of life in you,
for the sake of your Son who died for us,
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer may be said here instead of or as well as the following:

Lord God Almighty, your people are washed clean in the saving flood of baptism, and born again: As I follow the way of the cross, I ask you to unseal for all your people the wellspring of your grace, cleanse our hearts of all that is not holy, and cause your gift of new life to flourish in us; grant this through Jesus Christ your Son, who sets us free from sin, and lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, holy and mighty God, world without end.

Amen

Conclusion

You may wish to blow out the candle you lit at the start of the service as you say:

**Lord, give me the grace to always turn to the light that you have lit in my heart.
Amen.**