

Ash Wednesday

beginning the work of our salvation

I say to you: but unless you shall do penance, you shall all likewise perish



LUKE 13:3

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ASHES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

We find the origin of the custom of using ashes in religious ceremonies in the Old Testament. The prophet Jeremias calls for repentance this way: "Gird thee with sackcloth O daughter of my people, and sprinkle thee with ashes" (Jer. 6:26). The prophet Daniel pleaded for God to rescue Israel with sackcloth and ashes as a sign of Israel's repentance: "I set my face to the Lord my God, to pray and make supplications with fasting, sackcloth and ashes" (Dan. 9:3). Perhaps the best known example of repentance in the Old Testament also involves sackcloth and ashes. When the prophet Jonas finally obeyed God's command and preached in the great city of Nineve, his preaching was amazingly effective. Word of his message was carried to the king of Nineve. "And the word came to the king of Nineve, and he rose up out of his throne, and cast aside his robe from him, and was covered with sackcloth, and sat in the ashes" (Jonas 3:6).

In the book of Judith, we come across acts of repentance that specify that the ashes were put on people's heads: "And all the people cried to the Lord with great earnestness, and they humbled their souls in fastings, and prayers, both they and their wives. The priests put on haircloths, and made the little children to lie prostrate before the temple of the Lord, and the altar of the Lord they covered with haircloth. And they cried to the Lord the God of Israel

with one accord, that their children might not be made a prey, nor their wives carried off, nor their cities destroyed, nor their holy things profaned, and that they might not be made a reproach to the Gentiles. Then Eliachim the high priest of the Lord went about all Israel and spoke to them, saying: Know ye that the Lord will hear your prayers, if you continue with perseverance in fastings and prayers in the sight of the Lord. Remember Moses the servant of the Lord overcame Amalec that trusted in his own strength, and in his power, and in his army, and in his shields, and in his chariots, and in his horsemen, not by fighting with the sword, but by holy prayers: so all the enemies of Israel be, if you persevere in this work which you have begun. So they being moved by this exhortation of his, prayed to the Lord, and continued in the sight of the Lord. So that even they who offered the holocausts to the Lord, offered the sacrifices to the Lord girded with haircloths, and with ashes upon their head." (Judith 4:7-15).

Just prior to the New Testament period, the rebels fighting for Jewish independence, the Maccabees, prepared for battle using ashes: "That day they fasted and wore sackcloth; they sprinkled ashes on their heads and tore their clothes" (1 Mach. 3:47; see also 4:39). In the New Testament, Jesus refers to the use of sackcloth and ashes as signs of repentance: "Woe thee, Corozain, woe to thee, Bethsaida: for if in Tyre and Sidon had been wrought the

miracles that have been wrought in you, they had long ago done penance in sackcloth and ashes" (Mt. 11:21).

ASHES IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

The use of ashes in the Church left only a few records in the first thousand years of Church history. Thomas Talley, an expert on liturgical history, says that the first datable liturgy for Ash Wednesday that provides for sprinkling ashes is in the Romano-Germanic bishop's book of ceremonies of 960. Before that time, ashes had been used as a sign of admission to the Order of Penitents. At the start of the 11th century, Abbot Aelfric notes that it was customary for the faithful to take part in a ceremony on the Wednesday before Lent that included the imposition of ashes. Near the end of the 11th century Pope Urban II called for the general use of ashes on that day. Only later did this day come to be called Ash Wednesday. At first, clerics and men had ashes sprinkled on their heads, while women had the sign of the cross made with ashes on their foreheads. Eventually, of course, the ritual used with women came to be used for men as well. In the 12th century the rule developed that the ashes were to be created by burning palm branches from the previous Palm Sunday. Many parishes today invite parishioners to bring such palms to church before Lent begins and have a ritual burning of the palms after Mass.