

ASH WEDNESDAY

The observance of Lent is originally connected with the system of public penance. From about the seventh century those Church members who had committed serious sins, and who were prepared to submit to public penance, were sent into a monastery at the beginning of Lent for their penitential exercises and did not emerge until a few days before Easter. In many places such people were presented with a hair shirt on the first day of Lent in token of what was in store for them. Later, at about the end of the first millennium, the idea grew up of the whole Church putting itself to penance during Lent. The beginning of this time of penance was marked by the Imposition of Ashes whereby the Priest blesses the ashes and makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of each penitent. The people normally are invited to kneel at the altar to receive this blessing as they would for the Holy Communion. This evening' this ceremony will take place immediately after the prayer of humble access; "We do not presume to come to this thy table, O merciful Lord" . After receiving the ashes we will return to our places for the peace. If you do not wish to receive the Imposition of Ashes then simply remain in your place.

The words used in this ceremony are taken from the book of Genesis (3:19) - "Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return". They remind us that we were created from the dust of the earth and that we will return to dust when we die. This is not morbid or depressing, it is plain statement of the fact that in this life we are in the process of decay and ageing which even the most costly cosmetic surgery cannot hide. We delude ourselves constantly

with the notion that we can remain eternally young if we treat our skin with the best lotion. Joan Collins and Tina Turner are greatly admired for the way in which they keep the ageing process at bay. For the Christian it should not be so. There is a sense of liberation to be discovered when we realise that this is a ageing and dying existence, but that beyond the grave there is life eternal where, as St. John the Divine describes the saints in heaven:- "God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away".

To be reminded of our mortality also helps us to keep a sense of proportion about life. It is foolish to think that our material possessions will bring us security or happiness. Our Lord's parable about the farmer who built bigger barns so that he could eat, drink and be merry, illustrates the point. God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then who shall your possessions belong to, which thou hast provided? So is he who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God. (Luke 12:20).

As we prepare for Lent, let us take seriously the challenge to live our lives as if this day were our last so that the rest of our days may be lived in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

AMEN