

# Lent

by Paul Turner

Lent is the season that prepares us to celebrate Easter. The main reason Lent is important is that

Easter is more important. On Easter we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whose passage beyond death into life offers redemption to believers. The Resurrection is the cornerstone of Christian faith. The mystery of Christ's rising from the dead is so deep that the Church invites us to six weeks of preparation before we fully celebrate it. We call that period Lent.

For the faithful, Lent is a time of penitential practices and spiritual discipline. During this time we acknowledge our sins and seek God's help to overcome them. Traditionally, we engage in acts of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Together these actions show our dependence on God, our renunciation of the fascinations of this world, and our desire to better the lives of others.

For the elect, those preparing for baptism, Lent is a time of intense spiritual preparation. They will celebrate baptism at Easter because, in this sacrament, they enter the mystery of Christ's dying and rising. They die to their former way of life and open their hearts fully to discipleship in Jesus.

For the elect, this is a season of purification and enlightenment. The prayers of this season help scrutinize and purify their intentions, removing whatever might block their commitment, and strengthening their resolve. They will become fully illumined with the light of Christ when they celebrate initiation at the Easter Vigil.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends before the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday. Ash Wednesday is a day of fast and abstinence. All the Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence.

# LENT

PRAYER PENANCE ALMSGIVING

# Ashes

by Paul Turner

"You've got dirt on your forehead."

We're likely to

hear those words from thoughtful friends who display their intimate concern as well as their religious absent-mindedness when we go out in public after Mass on Ash Wednesday. The distribution of ashes after the homily replaces the penitential act at the beginning of Mass. Instead of merely "calling to mind our sins," we receive a very public reminder of our sinfulness. "Repent and believe in the Gospel," we hear; or, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

But it wasn't always that way. In the early church, only public sinners wore ashes. These sinners convened regularly to prepare for their reconciliation at a parish service and they formed (well, what we now call) "support groups." As penitents, they used to wear ashes on their heads or in their clothes. Symbols of human mortality, ashes represented their complete dependence on the mercy of God. In the middle ages, the support groups dwindled but sinners remained strong in numbers. So Pope Urban II ordered up the first Ash Wednesday in 1091. Ashes were for everybody, and we've been rubbing dirt on our foreheads ever since.

Dirt is something we're constantly washing off children and ourselves. Only in church do we deliberately put dirt on the most public part of our bodies, our foreheads. Ashes are what's left in the now-cold fireplace. Ashes heat the barbecue. Ashes are all that remains of the home after the tragic fire. Ashes enrich the compost heap. Ashes of the faithful departed fill commemorative urns. Ashes represent destruction, refuse, and waste, but they hint at new life.

Long before recycling became popular, the church got into the act on Ash Wednesday. Ever wonder what happens to those palm branches left over from last Holy Week? They've been burned into ash, stuffed into bags and now await the chance to dirty your forehead on Ash Wednesday this year. The symbol of Christ's glory has become the symbol of our sin.

On Ash Wednesday, you're not just another dirty face; no, you've tossed yourself into the recycling bin of Lent, ready for renewal this Easter.