

Ash Wednesday (Feb. 9, 2005)

On this first day of Lent we bless ashes and we wear them. We wear them as a sign of penance during this season of penance. We wear them also as a badge of who we are as Christians, followers of Christ, committed to him and to what he stands for.

During the Lenten season we follow the cross of Christ to Calvary where he suffered and died. But we must never forget that the crucifixion did not simply happen once and for all two thousand years ago. We live in a world grown increasingly violent, unjust, selfish, partisan, and mean-spirited. So long as that is true the Body of Christ is still suffering and still dying. We must not approach these ashes lightly. What we do here is very, very serious. Everyone who sees us today will witness this badge of our Christian commitment. Our public proclamation of who we are demands that we follow up with action. Our question today, our prayer and reflection during this entire Lenten season must be: how do we, both individually and as a community, join the work of Jesus. How do we help alleviate the sufferings of the body of Christ? What is our part in healing the wounds of sin and division?

The Lenten readings summon us to return to a God who is slow to anger and rich in mercy, who gives back the joy of salvation and sustains a willing spirit and who knows how our hearts can turn quietly to him. Paul summons Christians to be ambassadors to reconciliation, because God made him who did not know sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the very holiness of God. So that we might become the very holiness of God. That's an extraordinary statement. But it depends upon our willingness to be reconciled, something we pray for at the beginning of every liturgy when we ask God to have mercy on us. Reconciliation is not just between us and God but between us and one another. And that of course presumes forgiveness. Forgiving those who have offended me and begging forgiveness of those whom I have offended. It's a very difficult thing to do – but what a wonderful Lenten penance it could be, part of our

dying to self so that we might rise with Christ.

Our signed foreheads signal a journey of renewal through death to all that wrenches us from the love of God and neighbor, to the joy of victory over death at Easter, and continuing hope for life in the Spirit, when the ashes and dust of death will be no more,