“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” (Psalm 51:1-2, NRSV.)

On Wednesday the whole College came together to observe Ash Wednesday. In order to help our College Community understand what Ash Wednesday and Lent are all about, I have reproduced the text of my message to students and staff.

Today is Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of the season of Lent. Ash Wednesday is one of the principal holy days for our Church and is observed by Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Anglicans among others. Ash Wednesday falls on the seventh Wednesday before Easter and begins a season of fasting and repentance in preparation for the Easter celebration. Today I will talk about the origins of Lent and Ash Wednesday and focus on the key themes of Lent; to repent, fast, give, and pray.

The word Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon words lencten, meaning "Spring," and lenctentid, which literally means "Springtide". Lenctentid was also the word for "March," the month in which the majority of Lent falls.

Since the earliest times of the Church, there is evidence of some kind of Lenten preparation for Easter. St. Irenaeus (who died in 203) wrote to Pope St. Victor I, commenting on the celebration of Easter and the differences between practices of the Church in the East and the West. Irenaeus noted that the observance of this fast originated "in the time of our forefathers". The term, "our forefathers", is an expression for the apostles, so we can date the practice of Lent back to the time of John, Peter, Paul and the other apostles.

Lent lasts for 40 days excluding Sundays. The number "40" has always had special spiritual significance regarding preparation. On Mount Sinai, preparing to receive the Ten Commandments, "Moses stayed there with the Lord for 40 days and 40 nights, without eating any food or drinking any water". Elijah walked "40 days and 40 nights" to the mountain of the Lord. Jesus fasted and prayed for "40 days and 40 nights" in the desert before He began His public ministry.

Ash Wednesday dates from at least the 8th Century. One of the earliest descriptions of Ash Wednesday is found in the writings of the Anglo-Saxon abbot Aelfric. In his Lives of the Saints, he writes, "We read in the books both in the Old Law and in the New that the men who repented of their sins bestrewed themselves with ashes and clothed their bodies with sackcloth. Now let us do this little at the beginning of our Lent that we strew ashes upon our heads to signify that we ought to repent of our sins during the Lenten fast."

Dressing in sackcloth would be like wearing a wheat bag. Sackcloth was a very rough, itchy material. The pouring of ashes on one’s body and dressing in sackcloth is an ancient practice and is mentioned several times in the Old Testament. We find at the very end of the book of Job, Job, having been rebuked by God, confesses, "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). Other examples are found in the books of 2 Samuel, Esther, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. In the New Testament, Jesus mentions the practice in Matthew 11: "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes."
So as part of our Ash Wednesday observance we begin with repentance. Repentance is saying sorry to God for the things we have done wrong and promising to try to not do them again. Psalm 51 that Alannah read to us reminds us that when we do the wrong thing it is our friendship with God that we damage the most.

We put ashes on our foreheads to show God that we are truly sorry; we turn away from our sins and turn back to him. Soon you will be invited to come forward to have ashes out on your forehead. We will apply ashes in the shape of the cross on your forehead, while speaking the words, “For dust you are and to dust you shall return”. These are the words that God spoke to Adam and Eve after they ate the forbidden fruit and fell into sin. They remind us that the fruit of our sin is death and we need to repent and get right with God before it is too late. The cross reminds us of the good news that through Jesus Christ crucified there is forgiveness for all sins, all guilt, and all punishment.

We begin Ash Wednesday by saying sorry to God for the things we have done wrong but it doesn’t end there. As part of our practice for Lent we fast, we give, and we pray.

Fasting means we give something up, usually food. By fasting we remind ourselves of the fast that Jesus endured in the desert. Fasting is a way that we can make ourselves rely more on God and not on ourselves for the things that we need.

But what do we do to observe the fast? Here are three examples. First, on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, have only one full meal and some smaller snacks to keep up your strength and don’t eat meat. Second, on the Fridays of Lent, don’t eat meat. Third, you may want to give up something for Lent as a sacrifice; it could be your favourite food or drink, your favourite TV show, or your favourite activity. Whatever it is it should represent a sacrifice to you but it is not to be something that you make a big thing of. In our Gospel reading that Gus read we were reminded by Jesus that when we fast we should not look like we are in pain but should look like we normally do.

We are also called to give to others. We may give our money or our time to help other people. By doing this we remind ourselves again of what Jesus gave for us. Jesus constantly calls us to remember our responsibility to give to others and not to hoard things for ourselves. Today we are collecting money for the Mark & Demanuel families who lost their homes in house fires in January. You may want to give money to other worthy causes like Relay for Life or Anglicare. You may want to volunteer your time to clean up a neighbour’s yard, or go to an Old Folk’s home to play music or games. Whatever it is please think about how you can give of yourself this Lent.

Finally, we are called to pray. As we get ourselves ready for Easter we should try to bring ourselves closer to God. Prayer and reading his word are the ways that we do this. Even though Jesus was the Son of God we still read about him often going off away from the disciples to pray. Jesus knew that the only way that he could stay close to God was to talk with him in prayer. He even taught us a simple prayer to make it easy for us to speak with God. So try to set aside some time each day to read the Bible and to pray to God.

Lent is never mentioned in Scripture and is not commanded by God. Christians are free to either observe or not observe it. It is one of those free-will times when we can show God how much we appreciate what he has done for us.
We should remember though that saying sorry to God, receiving the ashes, fasting, giving, and praying, are all meaningless, even hypocritical, unless we really mean it and try to change our behaviour. This is made clear in Isaiah when God says,

_Do you think the Lord wants you to give up eating and to act as humble as a bent-over bush? Or to dress in sackcloth and sit in ashes? Is this really what he wants on a day of worship? I’ll tell you what it really means to worship the Lord. Remove the chains of prisoners who are chained unjustly. Free those who are abused! Share your food with everyone who is hungry; share your home with the poor and homeless. Give clothes to those in need; don’t turn away your relatives._

_May you come closer to God as you observe this Lent._

With all the blessings of Christ,

Rev. Tony Card.

_Thought for the week: “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”_ (Psalm 51:15-17, NRSV)