

17<sup>th</sup> February 2021

## Ashes

**"I am ashes where once I was fire."**

*Lord Byron, To the Countess of Blessington*

When I was in school, Ash Wednesday was always marked with the Catholic kids getting the morning off to go to Mass, and then coming back with a black smudge on their foreheads. I know now what I didn't know then, that far from this being preferential treatment for some kids who got a half-day holiday, it had a deep religious significance. For Ash Wednesday marked the beginning of the Season of Lent.

Observing the start of the 40-day period of preparation for Easter, ashes are ceremoniously placed on the heads of Christians, the ritual going all the way back to Pope Gregory the Great from the first century. The words (based on Genesis 3:19) traditionally used to accompany the custom are *Memento, homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris* ("Remember, man, that thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return.") Ashes, therefore, signify mourning, an indication that Lent is a time of contrition and repentance in preparation for Easter glory.

I want to suggest, however, that we mark Ash Wednesday differently this year. At the start of Lent, we might do well to ponder Byron's reflection, "I am ashes where once I was fire." That which burned brightly, set us ablaze in service, faith and purpose, may, in this past year, have died back a bit, burned lower and perhaps even gone out. We might feel, therefore, in some aspects of life and faith, that where once there was fire, now there are only ashes. But what do we normally do with ashes? Not smudge them on our foreheads, but bin them in the nearest bucket or skip. Ashes are fit to be discarded, thrown away as useless. Ashes need to be dumped! The American poet, Carl Sandburg, wrote in *Prairie* in 1918,

*I tell you the past is a bucket of ashes.*

What might you do with your "bucket of ashes" on Ash Wednesday? You don't have to lug them with you into Lent. You can leave the ashes of the past behind, and journey with purpose to Easter, looking to have your fire of faith rekindled, with your face set to the glory of an Easter rising.

### **A prayer for today**

*The ashes of my failings, Lord, I leave behind. Will you rekindle my fire again? Amen.*

*An original reflection by © Tom Gordon*

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