

Ash Wednesday homily, St. James the Less, 2026
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As you know, this day, Ash Wednesday, begins the forty plus day season of Lent.

Perhaps the two most commonly asked questions about this day and the season of Lent are:

Why do we put ashes on our foreheads? and

Why do we give things up for Lent?

We put ashes on our foreheads because for centuries, ashes have been a sign or a symbol of our **mortality** and of **penitence**.

The word “mortal or mortality” and the word “morbid or morbidity” share the same root in the Latin words “mors and mortis” which gives us not only the words “mortality and “morbidity” but “morgue” and “morticians” and “mortified” and -- not coincidentally, the name “Voldemort.”

But mortality and morbidity are not the same thing.

Morbidity or being morbid means focusing on death, or dying.

Mor**TAL**ity on the other hand means focusing on the fact that we are **mortal** -- formed of the earth, on earth for a while, and we return to the earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

On Ash Wednesday service, the sign of the cross is made on our foreheads with ashes as we hear the words,

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” --

Since 1994, I was in full time parish ministry for over 28 years... I'd say on average, I officiated at four or five funerals a year, some years more, so conservatively that's over 100 deaths and funerals.

There's something I learned in that experience...something you already know, but **I'd like to remind you of**, because it's a good thing to remember on an Ash Wednesday:

At the end of their lives, when people are doing self-examination...looking back over their life, surprisingly,

- they don't spend a lot of time thinking about **decisions** they've made (right or wrong)
- they don't spend a lot of time thinking about the things they did (or did not) **accomplish** in life.

(The line is not original to me but it's true: *no one* ever lays there dying and in their final moments say "Ugh, *if I'd only spent more time at the office...*")

- **And people who are about to die certainly do not think about how much *money* or *possessions* they accumulated:**

(As the country song puts it (as only country music can)

"You don't bring nothin' with you here
And you can't take nothin' back
**I ain't never seen a hearse,
with a luggage rack."**)¹

No, it's not **decisions, or accomplishments or material things** that dying people think about.

It's **relationships**:

It's people they cared about,
and who cared about them,
people with whom they had adventures,
or just memorable meals with.

The good news of Ash Wednesday (and the whole season of Lent) is that they are times given to us to do that kind of self-examination while there is still time to change...refocus, re-prioritize.

¹ George Strait, You'll be There

BUT IN CONSIDERING ALL THIS -- KEEP IN MIND that being reminded THAT WE ARE MORTAL doesn't mean thinking about death, it means being reminded that you and I are NOT **immortal**, angelic *perfect* beings. but rather you and I are **mortal**, *human*, *imperfect* beings.

When Jesus was asked to teach his followers how to pray, and he gave us the Lord's Prayer, he gave us a DAILY prayer: "give us **this day** our **daily** bread,"

And don't you find it interesting, that in that same prayer Jesus tells us to ask for forgiveness and to offer forgiveness to others..."forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"

...in other words Jesus knew that, being **mortal**, being human, means we are not perfect; we are going to need to be forgiven, and to forgive others, every day: on a daily basis.

God could have populated the world with **angels**, perfectly doing God's will. Instead God chose to populate the world with **humans**: flawed, flailing, failing, yet beautiful, brave, beloved people like you and me.

That's what it means to be reminded of our **mortality**.

Which brings us to the second question: why do we give things up for Lent?

By way of answering that question, I recommend [a short reflection that came out a few years ago by Fr. James Martin, S.J.](#), about the season of Lent and what we should be thinking about giving up for Lent.

His talk is **two minutes and five seconds**. In this, my Ash Wednesday homily, can't improve on what he says. So let me just summarize it:

For Lent, he suggests **taking on three practices** [three ways of being kind].

First, "[**be kind**] -- don't be a jerk.

Second, **honor the absent** (stop **talking about people** behind their backs); and

Third, **give people the benefit of the doubt.**"²

(And yes, those Lenten resolutions are a LOT harder than giving up sweets or soft drinks or snacks.)

I like these suggestions, these ways of observing Lent, because **they recover the ancient traditional meaning of the season of Lent** as a time set aside for **self-examination** -- a good time to **take a good hard look at ourselves.**

As today's reading from Matthew reminds us, God is not interested in our humbling ourselves as an end in itself, in public displays of our **prayer** or **fasting** or **giving** or Lenten resolutions [what drove Jesus up the wall was not sinners, but hypocrites], but rather God is interested in **changes in behavior that become good news to those around us** – tangible, visible actions of concern and care, especially toward the least and the lost.

SO...for Lent this year, the invitation, the challenge goes out, to **take on three practices:**

--**be kind** (don't be a jerk);

--**honor the absent** (stop **talking about people** behind their backs); and

--**give people the benefit of the doubt."**

Because while Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent is important -- while self-examination and repentance are important -- They are not ends in themselves.

The end...the goal, ***is newness of life.***

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² From Fr. Martin's Lenten reflection (Fr. Martin gives these points in a different order than I present here) -- his reflection can be found here: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/03/09/lent-dont-be-jerk>