



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

### **Ash Wednesday 2025**

Readings: *Joel 2: 12-18, Ps 50, 2 Corinthians 5: 20-6:2, Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-18*

As with so many Christian practices, the celebration of Ash Wednesday depends on a simple understanding of what went before.

Christmas, without the Advent cycle of the long winding history of salvation, descends into meaningless self-indulgence.

Easter without the Via Dolorosa and the Calvary is reduced to little more than a pop-up picture book of implausible happy endings to a tale not fully told.

Noah's Ark, detached from the judgement and looming holocaust that necessitated its building, becomes the charmingly domesticated of an elderly gent with a floating menagerie.

So, today, our meaning and our Mass intention cannot be separated from what has gone before. Yesterday was Shrove Tuesday – the end of Shrovetide which we no longer keep.

It has descended into Pancake Day – or as the French have it, Fat Tuesday, when we get rid of all the stuff our Lenten Fast would deny us. Mardi Gras is party time. There is nothing wrong with parties and parties that celebrate the Faith are particularly welcome.

But...it is vital to know what we are celebrating lest we become simply bleary-eyed gate-crashers at the home of an unfamiliar host.

Shrove, of course, comes from the old English word 'shrive' – to absolve. Our ancient forebears may well have emptied their larder, in an echo of the Hebrews removing yeast before Passover, to avoid the temptations of fatty foods in Lent – modern equivalent = giving up chocolate or booze – but the primary purpose of the Tuesday was to confess your sins, to get rid of the 'leaven of wickedness' as Jesus describes it, in preparation for the Holy Season.

The holy season of Lent, a time of prayer and fasting, is the key to our journey to the central event of human history and the climax of the history of salvation

and the unspeakable and terrible beauty of God's love for Man on the Cross of Calvary.

Today, we see Lent as the time which brings us to confession, at least among the tragically few Catholics who still avail themselves of this great and liberating sacrament. And we priests, on the whole, have colluded in that shift. We no longer set aside the Shrove for its intended purpose.

So we come to Ash Wednesday unshriven. We are anointed with the burnt dust of our previous Palm Sunday pilgrimage in reminder of our physical origin and end. Our mortality is writ clear for all to see in the sooty remnant of the conflagration upon our foreheads. Thus we journey on into the wilderness where, stripped of all else, we seek the encounter with God and with ourselves – the knowledge of who He truly is and our gratitude and utter dependence upon His near-profligate mercy.

Whether we have kept the Shrove at its appointed time or not, it is of the essence to all else in our journey to the Final Passover. The Gospel begins always with the exhortation to 'Repent and Believe'. The first is a prerequisite of the second. Recognising our need of absolution, of rethinking our whole life in the light of God's sovereign grace and mercy, is the very launchpad of our pilgrimage. Unshriven, we stumble on, overburdened by the ever increasing load of the untreated waste product of our Pride, the sewerage of sin.

Not only do we miss the full liberation of the Gospel promise but we become part of an increasingly impotent Church. The Mission is thereby hobbled and doomed, for an impenitent church cannot preach penitence to a fallen world. So, let us go about our Lenten business with a new seriousness – I preach to myself here, as well as my fellow pilgrims - Let us revive that serious fasting which disciplines both body and soul and educates us anew in our dependence on God. And let us be swiftly and regularly shriven that we might always approach the Mercy Seat of the Confessional with sorrow for those things we put in God's way by reason of our sin and leave with great rejoicing for the liberation of our souls that, by His one true and eternal sacrifice, He has made available to all who would walk with Him these forty days of wilderness, the brief but agonising Via Dolorosa, the darkening noon of Golgotha and the glorious triumph of the Miracle of the Third Day and the transformation of the Emmaus Road.

It begins here.