

Living Lent: Ash Wednesday Service Ideas

Holding an Ash Wednesday service at the beginning of Lent can be a chance to reflect on the way our own behaviours and lifestyles have contributed to the challenges we face. It is a time to hold in tension the confrontation of our shortcomings and the promise of God's never-ending forgiveness.

Giving your service a climate theme is a chance to focus on our commitments to acting for the climate, especially if members are taking part in Living Lent.

Lay out and liturgical notes

Your church may have set pews, but if not, it's worth paying some attention to the lay out. Mid-week services often have smaller numbers, in which case creating a more intimate feel could be powerful. One option is to put chairs in a circle with a small table in the middle for the bread, wine and ashes. If you do a circle, then it could be worth reflecting on the global shape of the earth in your call to worship.

These prayers presume you have the liturgical freedom to shape a service like this. It may be that you want to use one or two, or to shape the whole service around this. The requirements for a communion service will vary according to tradition, so we haven't offered prayers for this.

Call to worship:

Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.
Come and see what the Lord has done,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.
Psalm 46: 6-8 (NIV)

Opening prayer/Confession:

Creator God,

We marvel that we are made from the dust of the earth,
intimately connected and uniquely purposed within your creation.
Yet we confess that we have polluted this planet with sin and soot,
dirtying the world with unclean fuels and burning forests to ash.
We have disconnected ourselves from our relationship to this planet;
we have ignored the fragility and deaths of our fellow humanity.
Have mercy upon us, we pray.

Amen.



A sign of lament: imposition of ashes

Traditionally, the ashes are made out of the ash burnt from last year's palm crosses mixed with olive oil. The ashes are usually marked on foreheads in a cross shape. People may feel more comfortable having an ash cross done on their hands than their foreheads, especially if this is something from beyond their tradition. There could be different ways to make this work: people who want to come up can come and receive ashes in a line, or if you have a small service, then people can pass it around and anoint each other. If you do this, make sure you pass a napkin around with the bowl of ashes!

The words for the imposition of ashes are:

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

Congregational prayer for after the ash:

As we repent and remember our return to dust,
may we take up our crosses and follow you;
and be faithful to your Son,
who became human and died,
so that we might live.

In his name,
Amen

The unsettling Peace:

“They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious.

'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace.”

Silence

The unsettling peace of the Lord be always with you:

And also with you.

Let us not speak easy words,
but let us share with one another a sign of Christ's peace:

Invite the congregation to shake hands in silence.

The idea is not to share easy words, but to reflect on our shared commitment to act.



Prayers of Intercession

Response

Lord of all creation,
Hear our prayer.

God, we pray for the Church, that we might hear the calling of our faith to work for justice and peace. We pray that we might consider how our time and resources, gifts and talents, might be used by you to offer your hope and light into the world, and bring healing to creation.

Lord of all creation...

We pray for creation, as it cries out to you. We are sorry for the ways that our choices have used up the resources you created, and limited the life of your design. Might we see the wonder of your world, and find ways to live lives that enable all of creation to thrive .

Lord of all creation...

We pray for leaders, with the power to make changes which could lead us forward in hope. Particularly in the year leading towards the United Nations Climate Change meeting in Glasgow, we pray that those with responsibility hear your call to bravery and courage and step out for change.

Lord of all creation...

We pray for those who are already suffering because of the effects of climate change. The injustice of climate change often means the most vulnerable are first to feel the burden. Draw near to those who have lost their homes, communities and people they love. Help us to seek ways to bring justice in our transition to a more balanced world.

Lord of all creation....

In silence, we bring to you the people and places who need your guiding presence at this time.

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?

...Then your light will break forth like the dawn,

and your healing will quickly appear;

then your righteousness will go before you,

and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.” (Isaiah 58: 6-9)

Might we know that God, in love, hears our prayers. As we carry them with us, might we know God’s closeness, and step forward in hope.

Amen.



Lectionary Reading notes for Ash Wednesday

Joel 2.1-2,12-17 or Isaiah 58.1-12

Psalms 51.1-18

2 Corinthians 5.20b - 6.10

Matthew 6.1-6,16-21 or John 8.1-11

Joel 2 speaks of a day of 'darkness and gloom' for God's people, but also reminds them of God's 'abounding and steadfast' love. It includes a call to gather God's people together to respond to this calling of God, which could connect to a calling for the church to gather and respond to the challenges of the climate crisis.

Isaiah 58 calls God's people to turn away from selfish behaviours and towards God's call of justice and righteousness. It paints a picture of actions of justice, and includes imagery of watered gardens and the end of drought to signify the coming of justice on the earth. This passage provides opportunities to talk about why seeking climate justice is a calling of faith. This could link with the message of *2 Corinthians 5:20- 6:10*, which invites the reader to endure hardship for the sake of justice.

Matthew 6: 16-21 contains Jesus' teaching on 'storing up' earthly treasures, and instead encouraging Jesus' followers to seek heavenly reward for their behaviours. This could enable exploration of our patterns of consumerism, and how our lifestyles are oriented to earthly and heavenly reward.

John 8: 1-11 tells the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery. Its commentary on the sin of all people provides an opportunity to talk about our complicity in harming creation, and our collective opportunity to respond.

A bible passage for the climate-anxious: Isaiah 54:7-17 (NIV)

For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
⁸ In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says the Lord, your Redeemer.
⁹ This is like the days of Noah to me:
Just as I swore that the waters of Noah
would never again go over the earth,
so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you
and will not rebuke you.
¹⁰ For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the Lord, who has compassion on you.
¹¹ O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted,
I am about to set your stones in antimony,
and lay your foundations with sapphires.^[a]
¹² I will make your pinnacles of rubies,
your gates of jewels,
and all your wall of precious stones.
¹³ All your children shall be taught by the Lord,
and great shall be the prosperity of your children.
¹⁴ In righteousness you shall be established;
you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear;
and from terror, for it shall not come near you.



A sign of hope: a gift of a bulb

As part of a commitment to right living with the world, invite people to take a bulb and to plant it. This could have the following bible passage attached to it, or it could be read aloud as people take them.

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

John 12: 24-26

Dismissal

Drive us out into the wilderness places of our world,
where the earth is scorched and people are deserted.
Send us out to the flooded places of our world,
Where the chaos overflows and the planet is endangered.
Lead us out to confront the demonic powers of the world,
with the accompaniment of your Spirit and the gentle ministering of your angels,
And the blessing of God....

