

Worship Service for Ash Wednesday

BY ERIC HOWELL

Gathering in Silence

Meditation

If you have sinned, do not lose hope because of your error.
Pray instead.

On the other hand, if you have done something good,
never presume too much on account of your goodness.
Never congratulate yourself excessively.

Never look down on someone else for sinning,
and remember that when the wayward soul prays and repents
of doing wrong,
the Lord will raise that person up,
as he did Lazarus.

Aelfric of Eynsham (c. 955 - c. 1010)¹

Call to Worship and Invocation

Opening Chime and Introit

Holy God,
Holy and Mighty,
Holy Immortal One,
Have mercy upon us.

*Suggested Tune: TRISAIGON*²

Responsive Litany (from Joel 2:1-2, 12-14 and Psalm 70)

The word of the Lord
that came to Joel.
Hear this
all who live in the land.
Put on sackcloth
mourn and cry.

Wear it all night
for we are neglecting God.
Declare a holy fast
call a sacred assembly.
Gather the community
and cry out to God.
Make haste, O God
and deliver me.
O Lord,
make haste to help me.

Hymn of Preparation

“Come Near Today”

The holy Son of God descends
to human pain and need.
O Lord, to my assistance come.
Come quickly, Lord, to help me.

*With love assured, your healing Word,
the Spirit's flame, your holy Name.
Redeeming grace in this place –
come near today to help me.*

Who is this man, the Great I Am,
who loves so fierce and free?
My Lord! You lived our suffering.
Come quickly, Lord, to be near me.

Refrain

The holy Son of God walks on
to darkened Calvary.
To bear his cross is now our path.
Come quickly, Lord, to lead me.

Refrain

Now may our prayer be joined with his
through life's uncertainty.
O Lord, to my assistance come.
Come quickly, Lord, to save me.

Refrain

Eric Howell (2013)

Tune: COME NEAR TODAY (pp. 45-47 in this volume)

Prayers of Confession

(A worship leader reads the prayers that guide congregants into confession. After a time for their silent prayers, the congregants join in singing the first verse and refrain of "I Need Thee Every Hour."³)

Lord, we confess our sins before you.

We confess that we have fallen short of your glory and
your intent for our lives.

Open our eyes that we may see ourselves with clarity and truthfulness,
that we may have eyes to see all of that within us that is not
pleasing to you.

(silent prayers)

*I need thee every hour, most gracious Lord;
no tender voice like thine can peace afford.*

*I need thee, O I need thee;
every hour I need thee!
O bless me now, my Savior,
I come to thee.*

Lord, we confess to you that we have not loved as we ought.

We have been impatient with others with whom we could have
been patient.

We have disregarded those you have called us to serve.

We have chosen the selfish way when you have called us to selflessness.

(silent prayers)

*I need thee, O I need thee;
every hour I need thee!
O bless me now, my Savior,
I come to thee.*

Lord, we confess that we have not tended to the care of our souls.

We have been too busy to pray.

We have been too quick to speak and too slow to listen for you.

We have filled our lives with all kinds of noise
instead of patiently waiting like sheep for our shepherd's voice.

(silent prayers)

*I need thee, O I need thee;
every hour I need thee!
O bless me now, my Savior,
I come to thee.*

Lord, we confess our need of you.
We need your grace.
We need your patience.
We need your guidance.
We cannot see beyond the moment.
We cannot worship you as we ought.
As we begin this solemn journey toward the cross,
 we call upon your mercy and your love for our salvation.

(silent prayers)

*I need thee, O I need thee;
every hour I need thee!
O bless me now, my Savior,
I come to thee.*

Burning the Palms⁴

Scripture Reading: Psalm 51:1-17

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.

For I know my transgressions,
 and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
 and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
 and blameless when you pass judgment.
Indeed, I was born guilty,
 a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being;
 therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
 wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
 let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins,
 and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

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.

Receiving and Offering Ashes⁵

To apply ashes, rub your thumb in the bowl of ashes and make the sign of the cross on the participant's forehead. As you apply the ashes say, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Or, "Repent, and hear the good news."

Responsive Reading (from Psalm 103)

Praise the Lord, O my soul,
all my inmost being.
Praise the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits –
who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
and crowns you with kindness,
who satisfies you with good things,
so that you are renewed.

The Lord works righteousness
and justice for the oppressed.
The Lord is gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in love.
He does not treat us as our sins deserve,
or repay our sins.
As high as the heavens are above us,
so great is his love for us.
As far as the east is from the west,
he has removed our sins from us.
As a father has compassion on his children,
God has compassion on us.

Praise the Lord,
O my soul.

Hymn of Blessing

“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (verse 1, 2, and 5)

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of Glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.

Isaac Watts (1707)
Tune: HAMBURG

Departing in Silence

NOTES

1 This translation is from Carmen Acevedo Butcher, *Following Christ: A Lenten Reader to Stretch Your Soul* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010), 4. Used by permission.

2 This prayer, called the Trisagion (Greek for “thrice holy”), traces to the fifth century and has been chanted or sung with many tunes. This English translation is from *The Book*

of *Common Prayer* (1979). The suggested tune, TRISAIGON, is available on *Songs of Presence: Contemplative Chants for the New Millennium* available from Praxis (www.praxisofprayer.com).

3 Annie S. Hawks wrote the prayerful hymn "I Need Thee Every Hour" (1872). Her pastor, Robert Lowry, contributed the refrain and the tune NEED.

4 The palms may be burned prior to the worship service, or you may choose to burn some or all of the palms as part of the service. Traditionally, the ashes come from burning the palm fronds that were used in the Palm Sunday service the prior year. In making your decision remember that palms produce a strong odor when burned. Furthermore, they burn down to a very small amount of ash, though only a little ash is needed for an Ash Wednesday service.

5 Ashes may be offered by inviting congregants to come forward, or the ashes may be passed around the room in a small bowl so that congregants apply the ashes to one another.

Many congregations may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the application of ashes, and it can be a challenging tradition to embrace. But as our congregation incorporated the Ash Wednesday service into its practice, it quickly became one of the most meaningful services of the year for many members.



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