

# What is Ash Wednesday, why ashes and where do they come from?

**Ash Wednesday**, which begins the season of Lent, is a day when we remember our humanness by the mark of a cross on our foreheads. Lent is a period of repentant preparation for Easter. Lent is observed for 40 days in imitation of Jesus Christ's fast in the wilderness, and focuses on fasting, prayer, and almsgiving.

## **Why Ashes?**

In Jewish and Christian history, ashes are a sign of mortality and repentance. Mortality, because when we die, our bodies eventually decompose, and we become dust/dirt/ash. Repentance, because long ago, when people felt remorse for something they did, they would put ashes on their heads and wear "sackcloth" (scratchy clothing) to remind themselves that sin is pretty uncomfortable and leads to a sort of death of the spirit. This was their way of confessing their sins and asking for forgiveness.

## **Where do the ashes come from?**

On what we now call Palm Sunday, Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem while people waved palms and cheered him on. Less than a week later, Jesus was killed. The palms that were waved in joy became ashes of sorrow. We get ashes by saving the palms from last Palm Sunday, burning them, and mixing them with a little oil.