



## Ash Wednesday



**Date:** Wednesday, February 18, 2026 | **Season:** Lent | **Year:** A

**First Reading:** Joel 2:12-18

**Responsorial Psalm:** Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14+17 | **Response:** Psalm 51:3a

**Second Reading:** 2 Corinthians 5:20-6

**Gospel Acclamation:** Psalm 95:8

**Gospel Reading:** Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

**Preached at:** the Chapel of Emerald Hill Children's Home in the Archdiocese of Harare, Zimbabwe.

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**R**emember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. But you are dust that God loves.

In a few moments, you will come forward and someone will place ashes on your forehead. You will feel a small touch, and a cross will be traced over you. You will be taking part in something very ancient. For hundreds and hundreds of years, Christians have begun Lent this way. And even before that, in the Bible, people placed ashes on themselves to say, “God, I am sorry. I need you. Help me begin again.” Today you will step into that long history of hope.

And these ashes are not just any ashes. They come from the palms we held and waved on Palm Sunday last year, when we remembered Jesus entering Jerusalem and the crowds shouting for joy. Those same palms, full of celebration, were burned and turned into ashes. It is the Church teaching us that joy and sorrow, praise and saying sorry, all belong together when we walk with Jesus. The branches that once waved in the air will soon rest quietly on your forehead in the shape of a cross.

The ashes are simple. Just dust. In places like ours, we know dust well. It settles on our shoes and on the road when the rain has not yet come. The ashes remind us that we are small and that life can be hard. Many of you know what it is to go without things other children might have. God sees that. He does not look at you and see what you lack. He looks at you and sees his beloved child.

The prophet Joel says, ‘Return to me with all your heart.’ Not with money. Not with grand gifts. With your heart. Every one of you has that. And that is what God wants most. He is not asking for what you do not have. He is asking for

what you already carry inside.

During Lent we will fast. For some of you, that may not mean giving up sweets, because you do not often have them. Fasting can also mean choosing not to complain. It can mean sharing what little food there is without grumbling. It can mean letting someone else go first. When we fast, we are training our hearts. We are learning that our wants do not control us. We can choose what is good, even when it is difficult.

We will also pray. When you say your prayers at night, when you sing here at school or in church, when you sit quietly and tell Jesus what is in your heart, you are doing something powerful. Sometimes prayer is speaking. Sometimes it is listening. Sometimes it is simply being still and knowing you are loved. Prayer helps your mind grow strong in goodness.

And we will give. You may not have pocket money to offer. But you have something precious. You have your time. Your kindness. Your hands that can help at home, fetch water, sweep a room, comfort a friend, include someone who is left out. Giving is not about how much you own. It is about how much you love.

Saint Paul tells us, “Now is the acceptable time.” Not when you are older. Not when life is easier. Now. This Lent.

Jesus tells us not to show off our good deeds. We do not need to announce our fasting or our prayers. God sees in secret. That is enough.

Pope Leo, in his message for Lent this year, asks us to practise a special kind of fasting. He asks us to fast from hurtful words. To stop insults. To stop gossip. To stop speaking badly about someone who is not there. Imagine if, during these forty days, our words became gentle and kind. Imagine if no one in this school was mocked or shamed. Instead of laughing when someone is teased, you can stand beside them. That kind of fasting could change everything.

So when you come forward and the ashes are placed on your forehead, remember: you are small, yes. You are made from dust. But you are loved beyond measure. You are part of a great story of people who fall, who say sorry, and who begin again.

As we begin this journey to Easter, ask yourself:

- When I feel like complaining or fighting, will I choose patience and kindness instead?
- When I pray, will I remember that God is truly listening to me?
- With the little I have, how can I show big love in these forty days?

God will take your small offering, your simple heart, and shape it into something strong and bright. And this Lent, he will walk with you every step of the way.

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In preparing this homily, I consulted various resources to deepen my understanding of today's readings, including using Magisterium AI for assistance. The final content remains the responsibility of the author.