

ASH WEDNESDAY †

In many parishes around the world, the traditional method of distributing ashes is by making a cross with the ashes on a person's forehead, But the world pandemic changed that last year, as more parishes began to distribute ashes by sprinkling them on a person's head, or by providing a bag of blessed ashes for the person to administer at home.

The sprinkling of ashes is not a new practice. In ancient Greece and Egypt, the sprinkling of ashes on one's head was a sign of mourning. In the Old Testament, ashes were also sprinkled on the head or over the whole body as a sign of mourning and penance. In the early Church, the priest sprinkled ashes on the heads of those performing public penance, and in the Middle Ages, ashes were sprinkled upon a dying person. In 1091, Pope Urban II endorsed ashes as a Lenten practice, and recommended the priests sprinkle them on the heads of the parishioners.

Poland and Italy are two countries where the sprinkling of ashes on a person's head is a common Ash Wednesday practice.

Ash Wednesday through Saturday has been called 'The Porch of Lent', an entryway to help us get the feel of this "40 day" season. Take another look at your Lenten plans on February 27. The tax collectors and the sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them, (Lk 15,1-2).

My Lenten journey is officially underway, and today's Scriptural passage occurs on a different journey, one that brought Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem.

Today's parable and the parable later this week are great parables of mercy.

The Pharisees and scribes criticize Jesus because he was cordial and welcoming to sinful people. Even worse, he shared meals with them. Now, it was okay for the Pharisees and scribes to allow sinners to reform, but first let them crawl back and ask forgiveness. Let the sinners learn their lesson. This is not a time for celebration; this is serious, grim business.

Jesus didn't act that way. But these parables of God's lavish mercy shouldn't lull me into thinking: "Well, the Lord's mercy will take care of it all".

There is a big difference between saying: "God understands" and saying " God forgives". God understands could be taken to mean: God understands why I do this so O don't have to change what I am doing. God forgives means: I can reform.

God's mercy is a call to reform.

It's a call I'll try to remember along my Lenten journey.