Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2004
COMMUNION
Matthew 6: l-6, 16-18

Time and time again, people ask me, “What’s the meaning of Ash Wednesday?” “How did it get started?” “And how did the season of Lent, of which Ash Wednesday is the first day, come to be?”

First, let’s look at the context. We human beings are creatures that mark things off into segments of time. We think of our lives in terms of seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, and seasons of the year, such as spring, summer, fall, winter, and then years. Common to all cultures is the association of events to their proper times and places, with fitting observances. All cultures and religions have their calendars; they are not entirely invented, but grow out of the common stream of life, revealing the inner soul of each separate culture.

To put it another way, people celebrate what they deem to have worth. Our celebrations are ways of helping us remember. So, we celebrate birthdays, wedding anniversaries, and national holidays. For example, keeping the 4th of July helps us remember when and how this nation had its beginning.

Thus, from the very beginning of the Christian church, followers of Jesus gathered together to remember him after the resurrection. First, they began to gather each Sunday, the first day of the week, to remember his resurrection, which according to the Bible, occurred on a Sunday. Since all of the earliest Christians were Jews, they also remembered their Jewish heritage by keeping the Sabbath, the last day of the week, which we call Saturday. Sunday gradually came to be known as “The Lord’s Day,” because of Christians meeting together, and because it was a weekly observance of the day of resurrection.

Throughout New Testament times, Christian celebrations remained on a simple and informal level. There are, for example, no New Testament references to any Christian festivals other than the worship on the first day of the week or the Lord’s Day.

As the church grew and years passed, other observances were gradually added. In the early years of the church, most of the observances had some relationship to the Jewish religious calendar of festivals.

What we now call the Christian liturgical year slowly came into practice.

Such days as Pentecost, Ascension Day, and Epiphany were added to the Christian calendar. Then came Holy Week, the period of time from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, including Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

The celebration of Christmas was not observed until several hundred years later and was still in dispute in some parts of the church in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The season of Lent was added. Today it comprises the 40-day period from Ash Wednesday to Easter, Sundays excluded. Its origin goes back to a very early date in the history of the church, and by the 7th century, the whole western church was united in this six-week observance.

At first, it seems to have lasted only 40 hours, in commemoration of the time between the crucifixion and the resurrection, but gradually the 40 hours became 40 days, referring to the 40-day fast of Jesus. The word “Lent” is derived from the Anglo-Saxon “lencten” meaning spring, the season of the year when Lent is observed.

Ash Wednesday gets its name from the ancient custom of placing blessed ashes on the heads of the faithful to remind us of our own mortality and of the rapid change of things in God’s creation. Ashes are also a symbol of repentance and cleansing.

Thus, over a period of many hundreds of years, a church calendar of one year in length came into common usage — its purpose being to help us remember the birth, life, teachings, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

It begins with the season of Advent, which is made up of the four Sundays before Christmas, a period of time when Christians prepare for the birth of the Christ child. Then comes the season of Epiphany, beginning on January 6, which reminds us that Jesus came for the whole world. This is followed by Lent, which begins on Ash Wednesday — a period of 40 days, not counting the Sundays, when we recall the temptations that came to Jesus, his preparation for going to Jerusalem where he knew that he would face opposition, arrest, trial, suffering, and death.

Lent is followed by Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter. Forty days after Easter there is Ascension Day, a way of remembering that the disciples no longer experienced Jesus’ physical presence. The Gospel stories tell us that Jesus ascended to be totally with God.

Fifty days after Easter there is Pentecost, when we remember the disciples of Jesus receiving the gift of God’s Holy Spirit, and they began to spread the good news of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection.

Pentecost is followed by what is commonly called the Trinity Season, which continues on through the spring, summer, and fall. Advent begins the church year all over again.

In the scripture reading for tonight, Ash Wednesday, Jesus reminds us that when we go about deepening our faith, we are not to do so in order to impress others with how religious we are. We are not to be show-offs. “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.”

When I was growing up, I can remember individuals bragging about what they had ‘given up’ for Lent. They wanted everyone to know how religious they were.

And Jesus went on to say — to be one of my followers, you do not have to look sad, dismal, or gloomy. Some people do that to impress others that they are truly sorry for their sins.

So tonight, we are here to remember Jesus. Hopefully, we are filled with a quiet joy as we begin the season of Lent leading up to Easter. We gather here also to remember Jesus through the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Come to Christ’s table with joy and gratitude. Amen.