

St. Andrew's (JKP) Monthly Newsletter
February, 2012

Edification: It must be clearly understood right from the very beginning that I grew up with zero instruction as to the things of religion and churchliness. Therefore, when a number of years ago upon a fateful Ash Wednesday I made a colossal social faux pas it should be easily excused. On that fateful Ash Wednesday when noticing something amiss in a co-workers appearance, wanting to be discreet I pulled this person aside privately. With all humility I informed my co-worker; *"Al, you've got some dirt or something all over your forehead"*. I fully expected a heartfelt; *"thanks friend, for letting me know"*, or some similar sentiment. Instead I was greeted with a forced grin that seemed to say; *"how exactly do you keep your job here"*. Now it was his turn to discreetly explain to the woefully uninitiated that the dirt was actually ashes, and that they were there on purpose. *"Now that you mention it"*, I said *"that mark does kinda resemble a cross"*. Conversation over. He walked away, shaking his head. Maybe it wasn't so easily excusable. This ritual practice of the Romish Church is done to mark (no pun intended) Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent as having begun. Actually it begins with Fat Tuesday and the appearance of something called Paczki (yum). Ritual is a very powerful thing to human beings. We mark significant times and events with assorted rituals. Some put ashes on their forehead. Some have water sprinkled on their baby's head. Some slip rings of precious metal on the finger of their beloved to seal the vow of life-long fidelity. Ritual is powerful, especially when it aids in devotion and fidelity. But are all rituals justified simply because they're rituals and affect us powerfully? Is the rubbing of ashes on the forehead and the observance of a Lenten season justifiable rituals? Are they warranted by the Word of God and thereby justified? Are they in the end sacred rites in which we should engage?

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." Romans 12:1

Encourage: Hebrews 9 in part says this; *"if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"* In the bible ashes are frequently connected with conviction of sin and repentance. The penitent sits in dust and ashes lamenting his sin, or the sin of his nation. He is reduced to nothing but the very dust from which he was formed, and to which his sin requires him to return. Yet as we read above ashes also speak of a sacrifice for sin and cleansing. The sprinkling of these ashes would render the unclean ceremonially clean. But the days of ash-sprinkling rendering any type of benefit are over. Not only that but all it could do in its day was to "purify the flesh". It did not cleanse the conscience. It did nothing to truly free the penitent to serve the living God in a living way. As is so frequently the case with Catholicism it wants to cling to man-imagined methods of worshipping and serving the living God. Even when it does glean these practices from the bible they're most often that which pertains to the former, obsolete covenant. There is a new and living way. This new way cleanses the conscience. It frees the penitent to serve the living God in a new and better way. Marking ashes on the head, giving up this or that for a season - what comes of all this? The crux of the matter isn't an ashen forehead or an abstaining from sugar in our coffee. A defiled conscience that can only be cleansed by the blood of Christ, that's the crux. Let that mark be upon us everyday!