

PASTOR'S MESSAGE

What do you think of when you hear the word 'ashes'? Does it remind you of something burnt? Have you ever seen a forest devastated by a huge fire with nothing left but burnt out stumps with ashes everywhere? Nothing is green, but everything is black. Seeing ashes in a fireplace where there was once a beautiful fire burning reminds me of a joyful evening that is now over!

Long before the Christian church used ashes to signify the beginning of Lent, the ancient world used ashes to show repentance and humility. Remember the story of Jonah going to the great city of Nineveh? The people of Nineveh heard Jonah's cry of repentance. From the king down to the citizens and its animals, everyone put on sackcloth and covered themselves with ashes. Ashes for us Christians is also sign of our mortality. From dust we came, and dust we shall return!

In the season of Lent many people like to give up something. I remember one pastor who used to give up the church for Lent; his holidays began just before Ash Wednesday and he would not return until

Easter Sunday. The demands of the church and the pressure to give up things he enjoyed was too much! Do we consider Lent simply the season when we give up things we enjoy? Although this discipline is good to observe, and may help our journey, I think we should look at the season of Lent in another way. Traditionally Ash Wednesday marks the time when we start giving something up, but perhaps Ash Wednesday should mark the time when we start giving.

What types of things can we give rather than give up? Perhaps Lent may be the season to give time, especially on Sunday or midweek vespers, to listen to the gospel. What about giving more financially to the church or some worthy charitable cause. We all live in a relationship, whether it be a marriage, friendship, or belonging to a faith community. How much better would those relationships be if we gave more, listened more and invested more quality time with the people and community we surround ourselves with, rather than simply giving up.

Back to the word ashes. Ashes represent something that used to be, and is not there anymore. Ashes can represent and be the evidence of something bad that has happened. But ashes can also represent

the beginning of a new thing. The people of ancient civilizations used ashes to clean and wash themselves. From the ashes of a burnt building, a new building arises. Ashes from a forest fire causes new sprouts and plants to spring forth. Like the symbol of a phoenix rising from the flames and ashes of a fire, so does our faith renew itself—by our giving, not our giving up.

See you in church,
Pastor Jukka