

Reflection for Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17

Ash Wednesday always begins with a jolt. Joel's opening words are not soft: *"Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble."* The prophet paints a picture of a day thick with darkness, a landscape overshadowed, a people suddenly aware that life has drifted far from the path of God. It is not comfortable. It is not meant to be.

Imagine what it would be like to be awoken suddenly by a bush fire alarm, the fire is approaching, your house is directly in its path. It's now too late to leave, you just have to take shelter where you are. There is nothing else to do but pray. Unfortunately for so many people here in Victoria this has happened more than once in their lives.

Joel speaks into a moment when the people have been shaken awake. Something has gone wrong—deeply wrong—and the prophet refuses to let them pretend otherwise. The imagery of gloom and cloud is not punishment for punishment's sake; it is a mirror. It shows a community who must face the truth about themselves.

Ash Wednesday does the same for us.

It interrupts our routines.

It slows our pace.

It invites us to honesty.

The ashes we receive are not theatrical. They are not a performance of sorrow. They are a sign that we are dust—finite, fragile, dependent—and that we have, in ways large and small, wandered from the life God longs for us.

But Joel does something remarkable. After the trumpet blast, after the darkness, after the trembling, he shifts the tone. He speaks the words that sit at the heart of this day:

"Even now," says the Lord, "return to me with all your heart." vs 12

Even now.

Not when you have fixed yourself.

Not when you have tidied your soul.

Not when you feel worthy.

Even now.

God's invitation comes in the middle of the mess, not after it. And Joel is careful to say that the return God desires is not a dramatic gesture, not a show of piety, not a tearing of garments. God wants hearts—open, honest, unclenched hearts. Matthew 16:24-26

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life^[a] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

Ash Wednesday is not about proving our sorrow. It is about opening ourselves to grace.

Joel goes further: he reminds the people who God is. *“Gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.”* The prophet knows that repentance is only possible when we trust the character of the One we return to. We do not come back to a God who shames us, but to a God who welcomes us. We do not come back to a God who keeps score, but to a God who restores.

And then Joel does something deeply communal. He calls everyone—elders, children, infants, newlyweds, priests. No one is left out. Repentance is not a private spiritual exercise; it is a shared turning, a collective re-orientation. The whole community gathers, not to wallow in guilt, but to seek renewal together.

Ash Wednesday reminds us that faith is not a solitary path. We walk it side by side. We confess together. We hope together. We turn toward God together.

So today, as we receive ashes, we do so with honesty. We acknowledge the shadows in our lives, the habits that diminish us, the words we regret, the compassion we withheld, the love we failed to offer. We acknowledge the ways our world is wounded—by injustice, by indifference, by fear—and we recognise our part in its healing.

But we also receive the ashes with hope.
Because the God who calls us to return is the God who restores.
The God who names us dust is the God who breathes life into dust.
The God who sees our frailty is the God who meets us with mercy.

*“Even now,” God says.
Not tomorrow.
Not when we feel ready.
Now.*

May this season of Lent be for us a journey of returning—returning to truth, returning to compassion, returning to the One who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Amen.