

Ash Wednesday  
Joel 2:12-18; 2 Cor 5:20-6:2; Mt 6:1-6, 16-18  
February 14, 2024

Some of us here of a certain age here this evening can probably remember a song that was popular 40 years ago. In 1971, a group from Canada called the Five Man Electrical Band had a hit called ["Signs."](#) The song is about how signs are always telling us what to do, and the chorus says, *"Do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign?"*

Well, the Five Man Electrical Band has faded into history – though they have a web site and are still performing. The song – one of their biggest hits – is a staple. Four decades later, the question it poses – *"Can't you read the sign?"* — is one we might ask ourselves tonight.

Because we are here to be branded with the sign of our faith, the cross.

Do we know what that sign means?

Can we read it?

More than a symbol, or a custom, this signifies the start of an important journey.

It says to all those who will see us that we are making a commitment – that we are undertaking Lent, a season of prayer and penitence.

It also describes our human condition: it says that we are broken, and need repair; that we are sinners and need redemption.

And: it says, most importantly, that we are followers of Jesus Christ. We are Christians. We bear the sign of the cross.

If anyone questions what we believe in, the mark on our foreheads will say, in effect, *"Can't you read the sign?"*

What we are doing here is making open (explicit) something that has been ours since the moment we were baptized.

The first thing the priest or deacon does in the ritual for baptism is make the sign of the cross on the forehead of the person about to be baptized. In that way, that person is claimed for Christ.

At that moment, the sign of the cross is invisible.

But today, we make it visible.

And we do that with something that is a mark of our humility, and our humanity.

We are marked with ash.

This is a radical act. In this age of individuality and do whatever you want, we aren't supposed to do things like this.

But we do. We are Catholic Christians – living the legacy of the cross, and bearing its mark.

We are flesh and blood. The illusions of the world are just that – illusions. And here, during this cold time of the year, when the ground is frozen and the trees are bare, we openly acknowledge the reality of the human condition. We acknowledge our mortality. We wear it on our foreheads. We proclaim it to all who see us: This is what we will one day be.

Can't you read the sign?

It says that we are dust.

It says to all who see us that we are using this 40-day season of prayer and penitence, these last days of winter, to make ourselves ready for that springtime moment of rebirth, the resurrection. It says we intend to make ourselves right with God, and with one another, by renewing our commitment to our faith, to our calling as Christians.

By renewing our commitment to the cross.

And so, we decide to do without. We fast. We give alms, and make sacrifices. We seek to remind ourselves what really matters, and what our ultimate purpose is.

And today, we remind ourselves what our ultimate *destiny* is.

It's there on our foreheads.

But that is only the beginning.

Look closely at the reading we just heard, from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. There you will find a beautiful proclamation that should give us hope and stir (enflame) our hearts during these 40 days.

*"Brothers and sisters,"* Paul declares, *"we are ambassadors for Christ."*

We are ambassadors for Christ – bearing his message, carrying his cross.

The cross is our calling card. It announces what we believe, and whom we represent. It is the sum and substance of this season.

Tonight, we take it with us as we leave this church and go out into the world.

But what about tomorrow?

When the ash is washed away, will people know?

Will they still be able to tell that we are ambassadors for Christ?

Will anyone be able to tell that we are marked with the cross, that we have been claimed for Christ?

Will they sense it by how we live, what we do, the sacrifices we make, the quiet acts of penance we perform?

Will the invisible tracing left at our baptism, and reinforced this day, be clear to those we meet?

Let's not make this a one-time, passing event. In the days and weeks to come, remember what happened here tonight, how our Lenten journey began.

And, when each of us takes one last look in the mirror tonight before going to bed, let's ask ourselves just what that marking means.

Does it make a difference in our lives?

Can we make it matter?

Can we read the sign?

- Fr. Stephen Lattner, O.S.B.