Fr. Dale’s Tidbits,

In a few days (Wednesday, February 17) we begin our pilgrimage into Lent, entering the crypt of self-examination, prayer, and forgiveness “by a season of penitence and fasting” under the arch of generations of the faithful and the “mystical Body of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Ash Wednesday implies some sure, or maybe some not so sure, traditions of the Church. We have come to trust that Ash Wednesday has been and is a continuous historical rite of the Church as we know it today. History tells us something else. At the birth of the English Reformation, there was no Ash Wednesday rite. Really? You ask.

The first Book of Common Prayer (1549) had no service of Ash Wednesday. The exclusion of Ash Wednesday or Imposition of ashes by Archbishop Cranmer was an intentional decision in the continuing divorcing of the Church in England from Rome. The heading for the day was simple recognized as The First Day of Lent. The First Day of Lent provided a collect, Psalm VI, a reading from the Book of Joel, and a Gospel reading from Matthew chapter 6. There was no mention of ashes or imposition of ashes in the form of a cross on the forehead for the First Day of Lent.

One of the traditions and symbolisms of Ash Wednesday, as we know it today, is the Imposition of Ashes. We may believe the Imposition of Ashes has always accompanied Ash Wednesday or the First Day of Lent. However, the first liturgical mention of the Imposition of Ashes occurred in 10th Century Germany. In that example, the penitent was sprinkled with ashes over the head rather than smudged on the forehead.

The imposition or smudging a cross-of-ashes is first seen in monastic rites and was imposed upon the tonsure (a part of a monk's or priest's head left bare on top by shaving off the hair) of the monks, not upon their foreheads, thus eliminating any difficulty aligning the practice with the Matthean exhortation not to mark-up one’s face as the hypocrites do.

What liturgical historians know, is even when the practice of imposition of ashes upon the forehead grew, the directions (rubrics) of the service continued to express the sprinkling ashes upon the head of the faithful.

Why this brief history lesson of Ash Wednesday and the imposition of ashes? The question has risen in the House of Bishops how to safely observe Ash Wednesday during pandemic times. The noted liturgical historian, liturgist, professor, and former Dean of the School of Theology, The Rt. Rev. Dr. Neal Alexander answered the bishops concerns by reflecting upon historical traditions and liturgical movements of Church history and Ash Wednesday.

Here are some properties of Ash Wednesday that may enlighten us as we explore our preparations for Ash Wednesday 2021.

Earlier, I referenced Archbishop Cranmer and the development of the first Book of Common Prayer (1549) in-regards to Ash Wednesday. Now let us jump forward 240 years to the 1789 Book of Common Prayer, the first American prayerbook. Regarding Ash Wednesday, little changed. The prayers and readings were more formally incorporated to be used with Morning or Evening Prayer, and placed toward the end of the service immediately before the General Thanksgiving. The service heading was known as *The First Day of Lent Commonly Called Ash Wednesday*. Still there was no mention of the use or imposition of ashes in 1789.

Moving on 139 years and the development and release of the 1928 BCP. The first difference we may notice is the heading dropped “The First Day of Lent.” Ash Wednesday now was incorporated into the Penitential Order, or as an option described above, with one of the daily offices. And as with previous prayerbooks, no reference of or use of ashes were used in the service.

It was not until the use of the 1979 BCP, the Ash Wednesday liturgy became its own rite. We now have the “optional” use of ashes to be imposed and a prayer over the ashes, if ashes are used, as a “sign of our mortality and penitence.” Here we may notice the ashes are not elevated as we understand the bread and wine in the Eucharist, or the water at baptism, or the use of oils for anointing and sealing of baptism. Clearly, Ash Wednesday and the imposition of ashes are not a sacrament of the Church.

Alexander contends the 1979 BCP followed to closely the post-Vatican II reforms providing the imagery and overtones linking the liturgy and imposition of ashes with baptism and confirmation as the newly baptized and confirmands are anointed on the forehead. Moving away from imagery of mortality with the sprinkling of ashes on the head in the similar manner of earth cast upon the coffin during the Committal in the Burial Office, “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

Alexander confirms the shape of the rite stays the same, the question is about distribution of the ashes. So, how do we engage this historical trip down memory lane, living during a pandemic. Alexander suggests returning to the ancient practice of sprinkling ashes on the heads of the faithful rather than imposition in the form of a cross on the forehead.

For those who prefer the more contemporary custom of the imposition of a cross-of-ashes on the forehead, Bishop Hunn suggests using a Q-tip by placing the Q-tip at the end of the thumb for the imposition of a cross-of-ashes.

So, how will the receiving of ashes be administered at St. Andrew’s. A Facebook livestream service will be broadcasted Wednesday, February 17 at 8:30 am, then posted to be viewed throughout the day. Following the 8:30am service ashes may be received from your car near the doors into the narthex. The ashes may be received by sprinkling or being imposed. For families of two or more, ashes may be picked up and sprinkled or imposed of a cross-of-ashes on the forehead during viewing of the service.

Ashes available:

9:15 to 9:30 AM

11:45 AM to 12:15 PM

5:30 to 5:45 PM

Please state if you prefer sprinkling, imposition, or take home.

Administer ashes at home with these words:

**Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.**