



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for Ash Wednesday (18th February) 2026

Ash Wednesday is one of those days when a church building can be considered a good thing: it is a secret place to which we retire to undertake our outward act of penitence so that nobody else can see what we do; and yet, of course, we have advertised the event and it is being streamed to the internet as we speak - our secret place is shared with the whole world.

A similar sort of moment was broadcast on the Ash Wednesday of some years ago: an American politician was being interviewed on *Newsnight* and he sat resplendent with his ash cross set upon his forehead. The question arises of whether this was a showy bit of his own virtue or an influential person making a public declaration of our sinfulness and our need of God. This is a question I cannot answer; but it does point to an apparent tension at the heart of Christian discipleship: the duty, on the one hand, to manifest in the world the Truth emanating from the mind of God; but, on the other hand, the obligation of not doing it, as the Gospel puts, to parade our good works before men.

We might try to resolve this tension by arguing that, in the words of Saint Ignatius Loyola, we, "Seek no reward save that of knowing that we do God's Will;" and that any esteem that accrues to our virtuous actions is purely coincidental and of no moment to us, but that might not be quite as straightforward as the words superficially suggest.

Whilst works of penitence can and often are undertaken in private, much else of Christian discipleship necessarily occurs in public to some extent, since it has to do with how we treat other people. Habits of generosity, forbearance and so on - the counsels of the Gospel - create for those who practice them a reputation for virtue - not least in a society where they are considered old-fashioned virtues as they were termed in the wake of the late Queen's death.

Unexpectedly perhaps, a life that aspires to virtue is not without its pitfalls. In the conviction that we have embraced the true philosophy and religion, it is all too easy to yield to a misplaced sense of self-satisfaction. The challenge, as today's rites tell us, is not to focus on what we have achieved, but on what there is still to do. Whatever the approbation of others might tell us, in the words of Saint Paul, we still sin and fall short of the glory of God.

Or, as Saint John tells us, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us:" whatever good we do or evil endure, there is also good that we negligently or wilfully neglect and evil in which we too easily acquiesce or even willingly participate. It is for this reason that there is usually a penitential act during the course of the Mass - to remind us and encourage us to acknowledge that for all our profession of faith, none of us approaches the Mysteries worthily.

In the Anglican Liturgical tradition, that penitence is usually couched in the first person plural - **We** have sinned; in the Roman Rite it is expressed in the first person singular - **I** confess. Whilst the merits of the two approaches can be argued either way, for our present purposes, the Roman way points us to the fact that we are not acknowledging some generalised notion of sinful humanity, but the fact of our own personal burden of sin. The rites today emphasise this fact, everyone is addressed individually; everyone individually is marked with ash.

However, for all the sombreness of the Mass, our sin is not the main point of our observance. Saint John goes on to say, "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." This is the Gospel - the Good News - which every Mass proclaims: that we can find forgiveness and reconciliation with God not by our own merit and virtue, but by the Grace and Mercy of God, through the Cross of Christ, the mark of which is placed on our foreheads as a sign of that hope.