

Happy Valentine's Day! Actually, do you think that's why Fr Neil and I are here? No, that's not why we're here. We're here to pray with you on Ash Wednesday.

Today is Ash Wednesday and it's the beginning of Lent. Lent is a time we use to get ready for Easter. We start off Lent by getting ashes put on our foreheads.

Why do we get ashes on our heads and why do we need to get ready for Easter anyway? Some of you might be thinking that Valentine's day seems like a lot more fun!

Some of your teachers are probably thinking, "Why did Ash Wednesday have to be today?" Deacon's Steve's wife was a teacher for 35 years and she said she never remembered it happening before. In fact, the last time Ash Wednesday was on Valentines Day was in 1934! 84 years ago!

There may not even be anyone in this building right now who was even born when it happened last time! Now, boys and girls, I know some of your teachers may look really old, but I'm sure that none of them are 84 yet!

Ash Wednesday on Valentine's day will happen twice more in the next 20 years and then not again until the twenty-second century! So, if you're thinking it's too bad Ash Wednesday is today, well, it doesn't happen very often!

So why do we get ashes on our heads and why do we need to get ready for Easter anyway? These are good questions and it's important to talk about the answers.

It really come back to Easter! Easter is the most important day of the year in our Church and for all Christian people around the world. Easter is the holiest day of the year for all Christians. Easter is the day when we remember that Jesus rose from the dead and when he did, he did three very important things!

First, he proved to all of us forever that he really was the Son of God and not just another teacher with nice things to say.

Second, he proved to all of us together that we will live again after we die, and that there is a life in heaven we can share.

Third, he proved to us that even though we may have sinned and done bad things, God loved us so much that he was willing to die for us to pay for all those sins so that we could all be in heaven with him one day.

So, like any important day, we have to get ready for it. We get ready for other important days, don't we? When Christmas is coming, we get ready by decorating our houses, and putting up trees and making special food and shopping for friends.

We even get ready for Valentine's day! We buy or make Valentine's cards for our friends and loved ones, we put hearts up everywhere, you probably have hearts up the wall in your classrooms, we make sure we are prepared to get the most out of it!

So many years ago, the church thought hard about how we should prepare for Easter, since it was more important than any of those other days.

The apostles and then the bishops knew that just getting ready for another party at Easter time wasn't enough because they knew that if we were really going to be ready for Easter, then it was going to take more time, that we really needed to put in a special effort! So they looked at what Jesus did when he was ready to start doing something important.

Before he started going out in to the world to bring God's message to us, he went into the desert for 40 days to pray and ask God's help to do the things that he needed to do.

Jesus went to the desert so he wouldn't be distracted by all the things going on in the world around him, and while he was in the desert, there was no food and water so that he got hungry and thirsty and he could learn that what was happening in our hearts was more important than what was happening in our stomachs.

So the church thought, if 40 days of praying and fasting was what Jesus did, then we should do it too! If that's how Jesus got ready to do something important, then we should get ready for our most important day, the same way!

You see, when we have a lot of time to pray and think and sit quietly, then we will remember all the things we have done in our lives, and when we remember the bad things we have done, then we can feel sorry for them and ask God to forgive us and try not to do them again.

So we get ashes on our foreheads today at the start of our 40 days to remind us that we will all die one day and so we need to be ready, and when we get the ashes, Father or me or your teacher will say, "Turn away from sin, believe in the good news!"

So we start Lent by remembering to repent, and repent is just a fancy way of saying, "I'm sorry!" and promising that we will turn away from sin, from doing bad things!

If it seems hard to give something up for Lent, some favourite food or treat, if it seems hard to give a little bit more away to help others, if it seems hard to find the time in our busy lives to pray a bit more, then remember it is for a very important reason, the most important reason, to get ready for the most important day of the year!

Right now, the Winter Olympics are going on in Korea and thousands of athletes are there for the most special games of their lives. All the skaters and skiers and hockey players and curlers made sure that they got ready by eating the right things and practicing what they needed to do so they could be the best skier or skater they could be.

That is what Lent is for us Christians, we practice praying more, we practice giving up more for others, we practice being good like Jesus was so that when Easter comes we can be the best Christian we can be!

Just like athletes eat the right food, we need to eat the right food too! We need to go to mass and receive Holy Communion. Good healthy food will give an athlete a stronger and faster body and Holy communion will give a Christian a stronger and healthier spirit since Jesus himself will be part of us and live in our hearts, and with God in our heart then that's the best valentine heart of them all.

So when you get your ashes today, just think of it as the beginning of your training period. Instead of thinking about what you may be doing without,

think about what will happen when our lives change and we become the good people that God wants us to be.

And if it seems like it's too bad that Valentine's day wasn't quite as much fun this year, then we can remember everything that Jesus gave up for us and it won't seem so bad after all.