

ASH WEDNESDAY

ST PETERS ANGLICAN CHURCH BUNDOORA

28th February 2026

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Readings:¹ Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 / Psalm 51:1–17 / 2 Corinthians 5:20–6:10 / Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Theme: *“Now Is the Acceptable Time” Ashes and the Way Home*

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

¹ Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
 Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—
² a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
 Like blackness spread upon the mountains
 a great and powerful army comes;
 their like has never been from of old,
 nor will be again after them
 in ages to come.
¹² Yet even now, says the Lord ,
 return to me with all your heart,
 with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing.
 Return to the Lord , your God,
 for he is gracious and merciful,
 slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
 and relents from punishing.
¹⁴ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
 and leave a blessing behind him,
 a grain-offering and a drink-offering
 for the Lord , your God?
¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sanctify a fast;
 call a solemn assembly;
¹⁶ gather the people.
 Sanctify the congregation;
 assemble the aged;
 gather the children,
 even infants at the breast.
 Let the bridegroom leave his room,
 and the bride her canopy.
¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar
 let the priests, the ministers of the Lord , weep.
 Let them say, ‘Spare your people, O Lord ,

¹ *Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. (2021). National Council of Churches.*

and do not make your heritage a mockery,
 a byword among the nations.
 Why should it be said among the peoples,
 "Where is their God?"'

Psalm 51:1-17

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, in your enduring goodness:
 according to the fulness of your compassion
 blot out my offences.

² Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness:
 and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I acknowledge my rebellion:
 and my sin is ever before me.

⁴ Against you only have I sinned
 and done what is evil in your eyes:
 so you will be just in your sentence
 and blameless in your judging.

⁵ Surely in wickedness I was brought to birth:
 and in sin my mother conceived me.

⁶ You that desire truth in the inward parts:
 O teach me wisdom in the secret places of the heart.

⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean:
 wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸ Make me hear of joy and gladness:
 let the bones which you have broken rejoice.

⁹ Hide your face from my sins:
 and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God:
 and renew a right spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me out from your presence:
 do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹² O give me the gladness of your help again:
 and support me with a willing spirit.

¹³ Then will I teach transgressors your ways:
 and sinners shall turn to you again.

¹⁴ O Lord God of my salvation, deliver me from bloodshed:
 and my tongue shall sing of your righteousness.

¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips:
 and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

¹⁶ You take no pleasure in sacrifice, or I would give it:
 burnt-offerings you do not want.

¹⁷ The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit:
 a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

5²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 2¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

6¹ As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.

2 For he says, 'At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you. 'See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

3 We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, 4 but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, 5 beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; 6 by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, 7 truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; 8 in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9 as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

1 'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 5 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 16 'And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 19 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

SERMON.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of our walk into the desert—a place many associate with barrenness and isolation, where the noise of earthly existence is but the slightest whisper like a breeze. Ash Wednesday also marks the beginning of Lent, and today's scripture invites us into the wilderness and solitude of the desert, not to punish us, but to clear space within us for truth, repentance, and renewal. The desert, a place where God's voice is no longer drowned out, but audible.

Through Joel, God calls the people to “return to me with all your heart”². The summons is communal and urgent: priests and people standing together, naming their need, trusting the God who is “gracious and merciful”³.

The psalmist drawing the point does not hide behind ritual or self-defence; simply praying, “Create in me a clean heart, O God”⁴, and the urgency echoed by Paul: “Now is the acceptable time”⁵.

The journey of reconciliation is not abstract or theoretical. It is lived through endurance, integrity, and hope⁶. The desert becomes the place where we learn again who we are and whose we are. In the desert, we find intimacy; pretence falls away. What remains is the honest desire for a renewed spirit—a life re-aligned with God’s mercy.

Lent is not a season for competition as we measure our commitment against the evidence of others. Jesus, in Matthew’s Gospel, warns against practising devotion “to be seen by them”⁷. ‘Them’, of course, being anyone else from whom we want recognition. Ash Wednesday therefore turns us inward—not toward secrecy for its own sake, but toward authenticity. Fasting, prayer, and giving become quiet pathways by which God reshapes the heart. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”⁸.

Where is your treasure? Is it financial security, the freedom to enjoy vacations, or the need to be in control? Is it your relationship with Christ, whose Spirit is found in others?

Today, we step into the desert together. The ashes we receive mark not despair, but the beginning of renewal—the first step in our ongoing journey toward the God who meets us in secret and restores us to life.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² Joel 2:12

³ Joel 2:13

⁴ Ps 51:10

⁵ 2 Cor 6:2

⁶ 2 Cor 6:4–10

⁷ Matt 6:1

⁸ Matt 6:21