by[MALCOLM GUITE](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/journalists/malcolm-guite)

**25 FEBRUARY 2022**

As Ash Wednesday approaches, *Malcolm Guite* sees deeper meaning in the ashes

AS WE approach [Ash Wednesday](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/topics/lent), I find, with a mixture of regret and relief, that I need no longer worry about preparing the ashes for the service. That is finally someone else’s responsibility. I would always leave it to the last minute, and then have to ask myself: have I still got any of last Lent’s Palm crosses to burn? Can I remember how to do it? Will I set off the college fire alarm again?

I well remember the first Ash Wednesday of my priestly ministry, when I was informed by a very efficient and deeply liturgical churchwarden that I must make the ash by burning the old Palm Sunday crosses and then, to bind it, mix it with a little of the oil, blessed on the previous Maundy Thursday. Happily, she had retained stocks of both, but I soon discovered that the little crosses didn’t burn very easily at all. They were almost impossible to light, and I ended up burning my fingers on my Zippo.

I did consider dowsing them with the very last of the Christmas brandy, thus adding yet another layer of complexity to the interweaving of the liturgical year, and, at the same time, minimising my temptations in Lent. But my hand was stayed by wiser heads. The thing to do, I was told, was to put the old palm crosses on a baking tray and heat them in the oven until they were completely dried out, and then they would light more easily and burn completely.

Thus I learned that oven gloves, as well as cassock-albs and cinctures, were to be part of any new priest’s accoutrements. Anyway, it was all managed, in the nick of time, and I found that first ashing service to be deeply moving, especially when I knelt and was myself ashed by my long-suffering churchwarden.

It’s a curious thing that we should use ash as a sign of repentance and renewal; surely it is nothing but the detritus of destruction. And yet it is so much more. Its roots are deep in scripture, in all those Old Testament passages that speak of “repenting in dust and ashes”. Sprinkling ashes on one’s head was a sign of mourning and grief — the opposite of the oil of gladness. But there is deeper wisdom still in the tradition of ashing; for the ash that is left after purging fires is itself a fertiliser, a life-enabler, a source of new growth.

Perhaps, in the current ecological crisis, ash has acquired yet another layer of meaning. Both the fire and the ash are not only signs of our personal mortality and our need for repentance and renewal, but also reminders of the wider destruction that we have inflicted on God’s world and on our fellow creatures — on the whole web of life into which God has woven us and for which he also cares. Much of this was in my mind when, more than a decade ago, I wrote my sonnet for Ash Wednesday:

*Receive this cross of ash upon your brow*  
*Brought from the burning of Palm Sunday’s cross;*  
*The forests of the world are burning now*  
*And you make late repentance for the loss.*  
*But all the trees of God would clap their hands,*  
*The very stones themselves would shout and sing,*  
*If you could covenant to love these lands*  
*And recognise in Christ their lord and king.*  
*He sees the slow destruction of those trees,*  
*He weeps to see the ancient places burn,*  
*And still you make what purchases you please*  
*And still to dust and ashes you return.*  
*But Hope could rise from ashes even now*  
*Beginning with this sign upon your brow.*

Bottom of Form