

Ash Wednesday February 14, 2018

Joel. 2:12-18; 2 Cor. 5:20-6:2; Mt. 6:1-6, 16-18

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Season of Lent. It is a time of fasting, prayer and penance which leads us through the forty days to Jesus' resurrection. Symbolically the forty days remind us of Jesus spending forty days in the desert praying and fasting. By observing prayerfully the days of lent, the individual Christian imitates Jesus' withdrawal into the wilderness for forty days and at the same time contemplating his suffering, death and resurrection. While sprinkling the ashes the priest or the deacon says "Remember, Man is dust, and unto dust you shall return." Ashes are a symbol of penance made sacramental by the blessing of the Church, and they help us develop a spirit of humility and sacrifice. Ashes were used in ancient times as a sign of mourning. Dusting oneself with ashes was an expression of sorrow for one's sins and faults. The liturgical practice of applying ashes on one's forehead during the Lenten Season goes back as far as the eight century. The ashes are made from the blessed palms used in the Palm Sunday celebration of the previous year. While the ashes symbolize penance and contrition, they are also a reminder that God is gracious and merciful to those who call on Him with repentant hearts. They are signs that we are all sinners and we are all called to repentance. It is an invitation to look into our hearts and make the ancient prayer our own: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

In the early church the Season of Lent had a threefold function. This was the time designated for the preparation of candidates for baptism and confirmation through intensive study and instruction. Hence it is the time intentionally set aside for examination, instruction, penitence and prayer for these candidates. The candidates had to come to the church to receive the word of God and its explanation but were not permitted to participate in the Eucharist during that time. They were accepted into the fold on Holy Saturday after being baptized. Secondly, it was a time for long-standing Christians to review their lives and renew their commitment to Jesus Christ. This was the time for all the people of God to reflect on Christ's journey to Calvary where he died on the cross and ended with Resurrection. Lent was the to remind Christians to repent of their sins in a manner similar to how people in the Old Testament

repented in sackcloth, ashes, and fasting. Finally it was a time for backsliders or public sinners to be restored to the faith. They were expected to come before the Bishop or elders and confess their sin. For the next forty days they spent time in penance, prayer and reflection of the word of God and stayed away from Eucharist, but were accepted back into the community on Holy Saturday. In every case, it is a time for serious, disciplined self-examination, a time spent in intensive prayer and repentance before the cross of Calvary. Hence the church instructs the faithful that these forty solemn days are to be spent in prayer, fasting and almsgiving. At the same time we prepare ourselves to celebrate the death and glorious Resurrection of Christ our Saviour by being cleansed from sins through a renewal of spirit.

Repentance is the theme of Lent and the liturgy reminds us of the words of the celebrant as he places ashes on the foreheads of the faithful: "Remember, man, you are dust and to dust you will return"; or, "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel". The readings of today give us the same theme. First Reading of today taken from the Book of Joel, invites people to return to the Lord. God personally calls each one to return to Him with all their hearts, with fasting, weeping and mourning. The prophet says that a sinner must split apart his hearts, not the garments. The Old Testament often tells us that people tore their clothing as a sign of repentance and wore sack cloth. However, this was only an exterior sign and it never indicated true repentance. The prophet tells the people that they have to change and their hard and stubborn hearts must be transformed. They had to examine their most inner self and shun their evil ways. At the same time the prophet strongly reminds them that the Lord God is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not punish his people if they are sincere and turn away from their sins. God is not a God of punishment but a God of love to those who strive earnestly to walk in His righteous ways. Being fully aware of his sin the psalmist cries with the words that raise a cry of hope to heaven: O God, "create in me a clean heart and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me". He tells the people that all are invited and called upon to enter this realm of sanctification.

In today's Second Reading Paul appeals to the Corinthians to be reconciled to God wholeheartedly. This passage contains one of the

famous Pauline paradoxes, which redirects the whole reflection on righteousness to the mystery of Christ. He tells them that God sent His only begotten Son, Jesus to die for the sake of humanity on the cross. He who was without sin took the place of human beings and was treated as a sinner, so that all might become righteous in the eyes of God. Jesus through his death on the cross has helped us to secure our salvation. Now is the time for his chosen people to show their appreciation to the Lord God by walking in His righteousness so that they may inherit the salvation which He is granting through His infinite love and mercy. In the heart of Christ, that is, in the center of his divine-human Person, the whole drama of liberty was at stake in decisive and definitive terms. God took to the extreme consequences his own plan of salvation, remaining faithful to his love even at the cost of giving his Only-begotten Son to death, and to death on a cross.

Today's Gospel taken from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount gives the teachings of Jesus regarding the Christian way of living and their total commitment to God and fellow men. The entire Sermon on the Mount gives the ethical norms given by Christ that stand contrary to the values of the world. It is by embracing a spiritual mind that a disciple is called upon to follow Jesus so that he may mature in Christ by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus warns all against hypocrisy and pretensions and warns those who present themselves to be pious before others. Jesus says that they have received their rewards through those who admired them and praised them for it. However for them, there is no reward from God the Father in Heaven. Jesus then invites the disciple to a closer relationship with God. He says that their devotion and piety must manifest intimate and personal relationship with God, like the relationship between the father and the son. He must experience a transformation of his entire being to be transformed into a child of God. In other words, the disciple has to bear witness to Christ through his life and action.

Jesus gives us in today's gospel the three traditional pillars of Lenten observance namely, prayer, fasting and almsgiving. They are three great Christian duties-the three foundations of the law, and by them a Christian does homage and service to God with the three principal interests: by prayer with our souls, by fasting with our bodies, by almsgiving with our companions and fellow human beings. In this passage Jesus speaks about the need for prayer. Our prayer is our personal relationship with God. It is our raising of our heart and mind to God and

build our personal bond with him. The church expects us to give more time to prayer during Lent in order to be closer to the Lord. He tells that we must go into our inner room or the quiet hidden place, close the door and pray to God the Father in private so the Heavenly Father may see us in private and reward us accordingly. It is through prayer that we develop a closer, more intimate relationship with God. For a Christian, to pray means to allow oneself to be loved by the Father, to place oneself in an attitude of listening, of interior docility and to present to him all that we are, our expectations and hopes; it is to live prayer as a sacrifice of praise and intercession. Prayer also means to unite ourselves to Jesus, in the Church and his Body in history and to open ourselves to the breath of the Holy Spirit, who makes all things new; in brief, prayer in the Trinity is what we must increasingly discover.

Fasting is one of the most ancient practices linked to Lent. The early Church fasted intensely for two days before the celebration of the Easter Vigil. This fast was later extended and became a 40-day period of fasting leading up to Easter. Fasting is more than a means of developing self-control. It is often an aid to prayer, as the pangs of hunger remind us of our hunger for God. Fasting should be linked to our concern for those who are forced to fast by their poverty, those who suffer from the injustices of our economic and political structures, those who are in need for any reason. Fasting can help us realize the suffering that so many people in our world experience every day, and it should lead us to greater efforts to alleviate that suffering. Fasting helps us to rediscover the need and desire of God as the profound soul of our existence, disposing ourselves to be empty of ourselves in order to be full of him. Fasting rules have changed through the ages, but throughout Church history fasting has been considered sacred, as it was considered in the Old Testament. Prophet Isaiah insists that fasting without changing our behaviour is not pleasing to God. Therefore, the goal of fasting is linked with prayer. The pangs of hunger remind us of our hunger for God, and prayer and fasting together brings us to what Lent is about - a deeper conversion. Abstaining from meat traditionally also linked us to the poor and we remember the purpose of abstinence and embrace it as a spiritual link to those whose diets are sparse and simple. However, if one decides to fast it has to be done as abnegation and not to show to people how often we fast. An individual Christian should fast to the degree that he can manage, always being cheerful and looking healthy so no one but God will know that he is fasting. Then, we will be in a position before God the Father to receive the proper reward.

Almsgiving is simply a response by us to God, a response that we have come to through prayer and fasting. It is an expression of our gratitude for all that God has given and a realization that in the Body of Christ, it is never just "me and God." Works of charity and the promotion of justice are integral elements of the Christian way of life. It is a sign of our care for that in need and an expression of our gratitude for things God has given to us. Almsgiving, far from being an act of giving, is an attitude of the heart, a heart that is humble, repentant, merciful, compassionate, which seeks to reproduce in its relations with others the experience of mercy that each one of us lives in our relation with God. Almsgiving is simply a response by us to God, is a small sacrifice, a gesture of love, possibly humble, hidden, but genuine, which costs something and is done in praise of God and for someone who is suffering and in need. The giving of alms is a great duty, and a duty which all the Disciples of Christ, according to their ability, must abound in. When we sacrifice something of our own by giving help to the Community or by reaching out to someone in need in the form of alms giving, our left hand must not know what your right hand is doing. Jesus calls us to do all acts of Charity privately and then forget about it. Hence he uses the imagery of the deed of our right hand that is ready to give and the left hand must not even know about it. The acts are done not for the sake of receiving praise and gratitude.

Jesus today tells us that us we must do better than the Scribes and Pharisees in our human and religious behavior. He invites all baptized and every individual to avoid the sins of the heart namely the evil thought of anger, impurity, hurting, jealousy, slander and others. Our behavior must be such as to be approved by God and not that is applauded by men. He tells us to be on watch against hypocrisy. A hypocrite is an actor or a person who does something beyond his normal behavior. Jesus says that our Father in heaven will reward us for our sincerity and genuineness and the reward may not be here and now but we must look for the reward in the life to come. Let us pray to our Father in Heaven to grant us such reward that we may be worthy of the grace and love through his gracious hands. We pray that our Lenten season may be a time to prepare ourselves to the death and resurrection of our lord. Therefore during this time our piety must manifest private time between the Lord God and ourselves. We must experience a transformation of our whole being beyond going to Church. We must walk with Christ in our lives every minute of the day, from the time we

rise in the morning until the time we go to bed at night. Equally, when you sacrifice by giving in charity or by reaching out to someone in need, your left hand must not know what your right hand is doing.

The word "Lent" comes from an old English word which means "springtime" so it reminds us of spring cleaning and the new life in nature during spring. This season of Lent is a time of special grace for us in which we want to do some spring cleaning in our lives and enjoy new life as a result. Therefore we have come here today to acknowledge that we are sinners. We want to change our lives during Lent and come closer to Jesus. Therefore the church calls this season as a joyful time, because it is our preparation for the future joy of Easter that approaches us bringing his blessings, mercy and forgiveness. To practice sincere repentance, the Lord God tells us to change our hearts. We are called to examine our most inner self, those evil ways that we have to let go, once and for always. We must always remember that our God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not punish us if we are sincere and turn away from our sins. God is not a God of punishment but a God of love to those who strive earnestly to walk in His righteous ways. As we enter the Lenten Season, remember these words every day that our God is a loving and merciful God.

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