

ASH WEDNESDAY A Joel 2:1-2,12-17; Ps 103; 2 Cor 5:20b-6:10; Mt 6:1-6,16-21

Ashes. Dust. Gloom. Doom. Repentance. Prayer. Fasting. Alms giving. Rending. Self-examination. Sacrifice. Confession. Spring. Rebirth. Joy. Resurrection. These are a few of the words that might come to mind when one thinks of this day and Lent, a day and season that Christians all around the world observe.

Ashes. The ancient custom of sitting in ashes or wearing them on the top on one's head was a sign of repentance for sins against God and neighbor. We wear them on our foreheads for the same reason. *Ash Wednesday* calls us to repentance for our sins, a turning back to God. It is not necessarily a time of gloom and doom, of bewailing our sins. It is a day to *repent* of our sins, offer them to God, accept God's forgiveness, and let them go, day in and day out. I remember reading about a monk in a monastery, who upon being asked how he was able to live together so closely with his brethren said, "I fall down, I get up. I fall down, I get up." We do the same. There is joy in knowing that God is always ready to welcome us back. Psalm 51 which we will say/sing in a few minutes says, "make us hear of joy and gladness", and also speaks of "the joy of your saving help". So Lent can be a time of joy and gladness for the opportunity to repent, be forgiven, turn around, and be reconciled to God and each other. We open ourselves to God's love which enables us to rid ourselves of those sins that are an impediment to serving others. We offer our weaknesses daily to God, who already knows them and who has reassured us that we are forgiven. And we give thanks to God for this incredible act of love and redeeming grace.

Repentance is not just for the individual. It is for the community as well. Joel told of this in the first reading. After he told the people to return to the Lord with fasting and weeping, and with all their heart and reminded them that the Lord is gracious and merciful - there is that theme from the Beatitudes again - he then went on to say, 'gather *everybody* - women, children, babies, men - and sanctify a fast. So we see that this is a *community* affair. The whole *community* is to repent, turn to the Lord, and be reconciled.

Paul, also, wrote about the reconciliation of the community in the second reading. The Church in Corinth was in crisis and Paul was urging them as a community to repent and reconcile with God, each other, and himself. The grace of God is transforming and Paul wanted each one and the Church in Corinth as well to accept the gift of God's grace. God wants that for us, too. God cares that the soul be safe.

Lent is a time to gear down and adjust our spiritual lives. It is not a time to wallow in our sins. Joel, again, invites us to tear open our *hearts* and examine them. The Litany of Penitence, which we will recite soon, gives us an assortment of ways we can do that. It is a good way to begin our personal and corporate self-examination. Lent is an opportunity for renewal and rebirth. Lent means 'spring' when the rebirth of what was dormant reappears. **Ash Wednesday**, however, is about ashes and dust. The dust reminds of our origins, the dust from which we were formed and the dust we will become at the end of our lives. And that reminds us of our humanness, which reminds us of our sinfulness. And so today we think of our relationship with God and each other, for our sinfulness affects those things.

The gospel from St Matthew speaks of the spiritual disciplines the faithful observed, and they are the traditional focus of Lent.- prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Prayer develops and maintains our relationship with God, and fasting has to do with our relationship with our self. It is about self-denial, not from what is bad but from those things that might become obsessions that could take

over our lives. Almsgiving is a way in which the faithful keep in relationship with others. Jesus assumes these practices are observed, for he said “**when** you do this” not “**if**.”

When we set our goal for the forty days - our Lenten discipline or rule of life - we might change ‘what do I give up?’ to ‘what do I give?’ The word ‘sacrifice’ means the offering of one’s life in both Judaism and Christianity, and Lent, of course, leads to just that – Jesus the Christ offering his life for us. We commemorate his sacrifice in the offering of the Eucharist for the whole untidy world - the reality of life in the larger community. So, what are we going to give of ourselves? How are we going to observe Lent together as a parish, for remember that this is a community practice, too. How will our goals support the parish goals? How will we as a parish reach out to the world through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving? This parish provides several opportunities to engage in these traditional practices. There was an article in the *Guardian* listing them, there is a flyer on the desk in the narthex, and both Father Carlson and I would be happy to assist you in any way.

However we decide to observe Lent, the gospel reminds us to do nothing boastfully, for that compromises the whole point of the exercise. Jesus said to offer our prayer, fasting, and giving alms quietly and without fanfare. We want to be intentional, and we want our rule to be honest and something we can actually accomplish. If we are overly eager to look good to God or others, we will surely fail. So, be intentional and be realistic. Anyone who decides to maintain fifteen minutes of silence every day and has never done that before – won’t. Maybe two minutes to begin with, for the cares of the day creep in very quickly. Whatever we do, we must remember to offer all of it to God daily.

The Very Rev. Anthony Clavier wrote this: “The gospel today reminds us that the smudge of ashes on our foreheads may be either a boast, or it may be a sign to us and to others that this Lent will be about more than giving up chocolate; it will be a time when God’s redeeming work transforms each of us and our parishes.”

So. Ash Wednesday. Lent for forty days. Passion. Death. And then – Resurrection. God is good to us, and we have much for which to be thankful. We have the prayers of the faithful and the promise of resurrection to keep us on track.

I with you all a blessed and holy Lent.