

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Feb 10th 2016

Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God. Joel 2 Ashes

Give me back the joy of your salvation, and a willing spirit sustain in me. Psalms 51

For our sakes God made him who did not know sin to be sin,

so that in him we might become the very holiness of God. 2 Corinthians 5

Your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you. Matthew 6

All of this symbolism and ritual, and our beginning a change of our normal patterns, helps us mark how important the days ahead are for us. All religious experience is prepared for. We say today that we want, we deeply desire, that the six weeks of Lent will be a time of religious experience for us.

We are preparing to "rend our hearts." This is a time to let our heart be opened - opened to examine what is there that needs forgiveness and healing, and opened to new graces, new generosity, new compassion. We want to "turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel."

We want to reflect on the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus for us. We want it to become personal. Jesus was broken and given for me. My own sins - what I have done and what I have failed to do - have been forgiven. We want to feel that gratitude and let it transform how we feel about the sin of others. In this Year of Mercy, we desire to experience Mercy and become more mercy filled, in our relationship with others. Experiencing our own poverty, we want to be renewed in a dedication to notice, have compassion for, and stand in solidarity with the poor of our world. Then, the spiritual and corporal works of mercy can come alive in us.

All of this "activity" is very counter-cultural. Wearing that cross of ashes says that I am not afraid to walk around in the world, perhaps for only an hour, with a sign that says I know my life on this earth is not "all there is." I remember where I came from and where I'm going. It says that I believe in everlasting life. It says that I know who I am and I want to choose to take advantage of the days ahead.

This "public" aspect of Ash Wednesday can sound contradictory to what Jesus warns about in the gospel: "Be on guard against performing religious acts for people to see." I suspect that what Jesus was warning his listeners about is rarely our problem. I suspect the heart of what Jesus is warning us about is to help us to trust that God knows what we are doing and that God will hear our desires.

Doing anything that is religious to gain the approval, affirmation, praise of others is fairly empty and will ultimately twist us in very funny ways, as we all know.

The first four days of Lent are a unit. They help us prepare for the activities of prayer, fasting, contrition and almsgiving. Today, a journey to turn to God with all of our hearts begins.

Dear Lord, bless this day by blessing my desires. Help me to know how deeply you long to enter more deeply into relationship with me. Help me to fast from, to do without, whatever keeps me self-focused. Strip me these days from some of the unhealthy patterns that make freedom difficult. Let there be

some taste of emptiness this day, and let me experience hunger for you, hunger for a new way of life, hunger for how I might serve others. Let me enter "this joyful season Lent," and help us "prepare to celebrate the Paschal Mystery with mind and heart renewed."

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