



Joel 2:12-19/ Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

ASH WEDNESDAY
17 February AD 2010

Ash Wednesday bears witness to our fallen human nature and urges us to do something about it. Fasting, prayer and generous giving do not atone for our sins, but these spiritual disciplines teach us the joys of holy living and triumphing over the flesh.

Ash Wednesday is fundamentally different from every other church festival, holy day or celebration. The Church's festivals call on us to celebrate the fundamental truths of Jesus Christ; the doctrine of Jesus' Incarnation is Christmas, Holy Week we celebrate the Passion, the Lord's Ascension recalls his return to God's right hand of glory. Ash Wednesday has no Christological event as its source.

Ash Wednesday is the one day on the calendar that focuses on you, "the sons and daughters of Eve." The ashes imposed on our heads follow the words God spoke to our parents, "you are dust, and to the dust you shall return." (Gen. 3) Ash Wednesday is about people. God's Word calls us back to faith and it demands a change of heart and attitude (repentance). On Ash Wednesday God is calling us back to himself.

It is not surprising then that the chief reading from Matthew concerns personal piety; the way we live out our faith lives. Jesus addresses three issues and speaking to the Pharisees he condemns the way they go about prayer, giving and fasting. Jesus' point is that they pray, give and fast for all the wrong the reasons. Whatever it is they do, they do it to be seen. They want all their neighbors and family to know how holy they are, how religious they've become.

***Being religious is one thing,
holiness is another***

If *that* was what they meant to do, they achieved it. Everyone knew these men were religious zealots, no one, not even Jesus would dispute it. But faith is not about being religious. A holy life, that life of a saint that really matters consists in what you and I do not see. What matters is that God sees and he does.

Everyone knows about Mother Theresa of Calcutta. In her own lifetime she was hailed as a living saint. You would never have said that to her face, she would have corrected you. The masses know her as the little lady who rescued the dying from the streets of Calcutta and gave them a few moments of dignity and unconditional love before they passed from this world to the next. Mother, with her

Missionaries of Charity, bathed and bandaged dirty bodies, fed the hungry and prayed to Jesus for their souls. Certainly the work she embraced was worthy of praise. She would have little of it, unless it somehow furthered the work.

What will make Mother a saint is not the work we admired. In the end it will be the journals she kept, in her notebooks she recorded her personal and private struggles with God. Only now are we learning that God often seemed so distant to Mother Theresa. In spite of the divine silence she continued for decades with her work and with her prayers. She did not give up on either. Holiness does not consist in the life that everyone sees, but in the life we live when no one is watching.

Faith assumptions

What I find interesting in the Gospel reading are Jesus' assumptions about us. He does not ask us to pray but he assumes that his followers are a people of prayer. "*When you pray.*" You can take him literally and lock yourself in your room when it's time to pray. But disappearing from your family or friends and locking yourself in your room can become a show all of its own.

"*When you fast.*" Imagine that! Jesus assumes that fasting is a part of our prayer and worship life. I am still reading a book on that topic. But many of us are guilty of thinking that we don't need to fast; "protestants don't do that." Who says? Fasting is an act of repentance; it's a sign of our obedience to God. By the spiritual discipline of fasting we train our bodies to be obedient to the will of the Spirit.

Fasting can be as simple as skipping lunch and devoting the hour to prayer. Lenten fasting has usually been understood less severely. We give up something for the forty days: usually deserts. Meatless Wednesdays and Fridays work for others. The idea is that what you give up, you give away. The money you may pay for the roast is given to charity. Years ago we had little Lenten banks to collect our coffee money, our candy money, etc.

Charity, giving alms: again our Lord begins, "*when you give alms.*" Jesus was criticizing the Pharisees because they made a big show of giving to the poor, embarrassing the needy in the process. We bring our gifts and leave them on the pew and from there they go to food pantry. But it's not as though we have no obligation here, we do. God's people need to pray for the poor and those who are seeking gainful employment. According to our blessings we share with those who need.

Prayer, fasting and giving; these are assumed. This is part of our ministry to and for each other, and for the larger community. Jesus didn't say, if you feel like

being religious, this is how you do it. He assumes that these practices, but not these alone, are part of our discipleship. If they are not, then today is for you; Ash Wednesday is for you. It's a day to repent; it's time to say,

“I'm sorry God, I screwed up,
I misunderstood,
I forgot,
I'm ashamed of myself,
I have taken so much for granted.
Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

The ashes by themselves don't quite cut it, do they? The ashen cross on our brow is us being religious, which is okay. But the ashes aren't going to make right our lack of faith, our laziness, the missed opportunities to show a kindness or share the love of Jesus. To say, “I repent” is one thing; to actually repent is altogether a different matter. Repentance is turning our lives around 180 degrees. Repentance is faith in action. It's doing, it's hearing the Word of God and applying it to life.

The ashes this evening are how we admit to ourselves and in the presence of each other that we are mortal. Like our Father Adam and our Mother Eve, we will return to the dust of the earth from which we were made. At the pastor's Bible retreat a few weeks ago I shared with my colleagues that Creation came into being by the Word of God—by *fiat*. The Bible details how God spoke everything into existence, everything that is but Adam. From the very beginning, when God got involved with *man*, he got his hands dirty. He's been busy with us ever since.

The bloodstained hands and brow are *for us and for our salvation*; it was accomplished on the cross. Our relationship with God has never been easy for Him, or for us. But God is in it for love; he's in it because he cares about you.