

17 Ash Wednesday

Year C

March 6, 2019

Joel 2:12-18 Psalm 51

2Corinthians 5:20-6:2

Matthew 6:1-6,16-18

Jesus invites us to once again embark on a Lenten journey with Him. We may ask ourselves, “Did we not just do this last year?” or “What more can we get out of doing Lent again this year?” While the crucial question to ask may actually be, “What is God trying to reveal to me so that I can be in a closer relationship with Him?” We know that anything that we value takes some special event in order to make sure that it does not fade away. This is why we celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, weddings and other milestones in life.

This is also true with our relationship with God. To skip Lent would make it very easy to drift away from the things of God and our relationship to Him. The forty-days of Lent are set aside by Christ’s Church to help us step out of our routine and renew our relationship with God. In today’s Gospel, Jesus encourages us to use Lent as a time to pray, fast and give alms, not to impress others, but to humble ourselves and give glory to God.

First is prayer. How do we pray? When do we pray? Lent is a time to examine our life of prayer. Are we simply reciting prayers by rote or are we truly in communion with God? How often do we pray? Is it only for emergencies or is it a daily practice? Our prayer life reflects our relationship with God, a special relationship that is distinctly our own. It is intensely personal. Nobody can do our praying for us.

Lent is a time to diagnose the health of our prayer life. Perhaps you could make a small Lenten practice of taking an extra ten minutes a day for prayer. Perhaps you could dust off the Bible and meditate on the Gospels, especially the Gospel of Luke, in preparation for Easter.

Or you could make a commitment to attend our Friday morning 9:00 AM Mass and stay afterwards to pray the *Stations of the Cross*, journeying with Jesus from His mock trial, walking along the streets of Jerusalem and helping Jesus carry His Cross, then being with Jesus at His crucifixion and going with His mother to His burial.

Second is fasting and abstinence. Fast and abstinence are splendid practices during Lent because they purify the body and purify the soul. What will you be fasting from for Lent? The usual understanding of fasting has to do with giving up eating certain

foods, such as not eating candy, eating a half meal on some days, not eating meat on Friday, and also abstaining from smoking and drinking. But, in fact, fasting and abstinence can be practiced in many other worthy ways as well.

We could abstain from watching television, less time on the computer, Facebook and playing video games and, even from fighting in the family, and instead, spend that time educating ourselves about how we might work for peace and justice in our family and in our world. Perhaps we could just stop for a half hour in the evening and pray the Rosary together as a family, or as single person for peace or the end of abortion or for a special intention. Or perhaps make a commitment to attend the weekly daily Mass at 9:00 AM.

There is so much good that can arise and have much value from fasting and abstinence. We just need to be sure we know why we fast and abstain, and how doing so brings us closer to God.

Finally, there is almsgiving or works of charity. This practice takes us out of the capsule of our private life to address the wider world of need that surrounds us. Lent is time to carry out acts of love and compassion to those who are part of our daily life. We should actually be doing these acts of love and compassion though not only during Lent but each and every day.

Perhaps this year we can take a more pro-active approach to the season by *forgiving* each other, by *feeding* the poor, by *visiting* the sick and by *praying* for each other, as God wants us to do. To seek out those who are in need is a conscious choice of the heart and the will. It takes a deliberate action on our part.

You are not bound by the Lenten practices of fasting and abstinence from meat during Lent *except* on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. *But* you can choose to do so on more days than just those two. You are not required to increase your level of daily prayer, or good works of charity. *But* you can choose to pray more often and help the poor in different ways.

You will not have teachers, or parents, or co-workers, or family members, or friends, or the Church watching what you do during Lent. *But* you have your own conscience, and your only commitment to personal integrity to do things God would want you to do.

If you want to move closer to God, and want to use Lent to help you do so, it is your choice, your undertaking, and your responsibility to God and yourself. And if you create habits of intentional self-denial instead of self-gratification, of more prayer responses to God's many blessings, and of more personal involvement in relieving the plight of those who are the least among us, then your Lent is going to be much more pleasing to Our Lord.

However you envision the season of Lent, one thing is clear; Lent is God's gift to us. It is a forty-day period of grace during which we are invited to know God more clearly, follow Him more nearly, and love Him more dearly. How will you make use of this forty-day retreat to deepen your relationship with Our Lord? What attitudes within you need to be adjusted so that you can more faithfully live out the call of your Baptism?

In a few moments, you will be invited to approach the altar to be marked on the forehead with ashes in the sign of Christ's cross. You will hear the words: *Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.* Your response will be, *Amen.*

As the ashes are traced on your forehead, pray that the old sinful ways of life will die and that a new life of joy will be born within your heart. We are challenged and encouraged during this Lenten season to turn away from sin and be faithful to the teachings and commandments of Christ.

When the ashes have been traced on our forehead, we will begin this holy season of Lent when we are invited to enter into the desert with Jesus to pray and fast for forty-days. This time is intended to help us to prepare for Easter when we will share in the new life of Christ's resurrection.