

16 Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:12-18 Psalm 51

Year A
2Corinthians 5:20-6:2

February 26, 2020
Matthew 6:1-6,16-18

Today, as we begin our Lenten Season, our foreheads are marked with ashes in the *Sign of the Cross*. In this action we are reminded of our need to repent, to seek forgiveness and to be forgiving of those who have hurt us. We are reminded that our earthly lives will come to an end and to ashes our earthly bodies will return.

During these next forty days we are asked to focus on our relationship with God and on the ways in which we live our lives. Each of us has an area in our own lives that tends to stand in the way of our coming closer to Jesus and to truly following His way of the Cross. Jesus invites us to quiet time in the wilderness and the desert of our busy lives, to discover from Him what we need to let go of and what we need to practice in order to draw nearer to Him and to radiate His life and love to others.

Today's Readings from the prophet Joel and the Gospel of Matthew show us how to get the most out of our Lenten penitential practices. Joel appeals to the Israelites to change their hearts with fasting and prayer and return to God. Joel reminds the people that God is gracious and merciful, "*slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment.*"

From the Gospel we heard the three traditionally central elements of Lent, *fasting, prayer and almsgiving*. Let our *fasting* be done in union with Christ's suffering in His passion and death. Fasting and abstinence are splendid practices during Lent because they purify the body and purify the soul. We just need to be sure we know why we fast and abstain, and how doing so brings us closer to God.

Lent is a time to diagnose the health of our prayer life. How do we pray? When do we pray? Lent is a time to examine our life of prayer. Our prayer life reflects our relationship with God, a special relationship that is distinctly our own. Let our *prayers* be in union with Christ, our Passover.

Let our *almsgiving* be an imitation of the generosity of Jesus who, in His Paschal Mystery, thought not of Himself but of us. This practice takes us out of the capsule of our private life to address the wider world of need that surrounds us. It reminds us that we have a responsibility for our brothers and sisters who are in need materially and spiritually.

After the homily we will receive the ashes, calling us to enter into a conversion linked to the Gospel, linked to God. As the priest marks your forehead with ashes in the sign of the cross, you will hear him say, *“Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.”* Your faith 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 encouraged during this Lenten season to turn away from sin and be faithful to the teachings of the Gospel.

Ashes in themselves will not change our hearts. It is our acceptance and belief in the transforming power of Jesus that will change our hearts of stone into hearts of warmth and love for each other and to turn away from sin.

And so today begins a very special time in this year of Our Lord 2020 and in the lives of every one of us. God took forty years in the desert of Arabia to form and purify His people Israel. The sinless Jesus, led by the Holy Spirit, fasted and prayed for forty days in the desert to prepare for His saving mission on earth.

And this Lent is our forty-day opportunity to be led by the Holy Spirit into the desert of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, with the aim of becoming totally converted to a life of faith, hope, and love and with the aim of turning away from sin. In our forty days with Our Lord, we have the opportunity to deepen our relationship with Him and it is a time of spiritual renewal.

However you envision the season of Lent, one thing is clear. It is truly God’s gift to us. Let this Lenten season of forty days be a special journey with Christ to Good Friday’s Cross of sadness and then to Easter’s Resurrection of joy. May this Lenten season fill you with untold blessings.