

Ash Wednesday 2018

Joel 2:12-18; 2 Cor 5:20-6:2; Mt 6:1-6, 16-18

In the gospel today Jesus says a bit about the three classic penitential practices that are part of the Christian Lent: Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving. These three things don't really go out of style - even if it seems that they are not as fashionable as they once were - Jesus' words do not become void because of changing fashions. In the past, in our culture, people perhaps engaged in these practices out of a sense of duty and obligation only. Doing them because some told them to, but not for the deeper reasons that make them spiritual practices that bring life. The same things was happening in Jesus' time as well. People were doing the required practices because they were supposed to, and - if we look at his words - it seems they were often doing them so that everyone would notice. Doing out of a sense of obligation only or for show ... this does not lead to spiritual growth ... neither does abandoning these practices altogether.

To be honest, there always have been people using these Lenten practices well. In Jesus' time there were devout persons who fasted, prayed, and provided for the less fortunate in a way that was quite and that helped them to grow and to deepen their relationship with God and neighbor. The same is true today. They can be vehicles of growth and strength or they can be empty practices that we shrug off as meaningless. So what makes the difference? The difference comes from the motivations of the heart. The motive for doing things like praying, fasting, and almsgiving should not be because of the obligations that God or the Church provide, it should not be just to get something good for yourself (whether that is attention, recognition, or the loss of a few pounds), it should be out of a heartfelt desire to return to the Lord - to remember again the important part in our life that God is meant to occupy.

We heard in the first reading: *Even now, says the LORD, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God.* We all tend to drift from God. We all tend to get so involved in the things of our lives that we lose perspective of the God who is out there and calling to us. We all get wrapped up in our own projects, plans, relationships, struggles, and worldly treasures. God calls us to return to realize that there is a God out there who loves us and who came to us in Jesus Christ to save us from the inevitable spiritual death that comes from cutting God out of our life. God calls us to engage practices (the first reading mentions fasting, weeping, and mourning;

Jesus speaks of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving) but not to focus on the outward practice but on the deeper things that these are connected to: *Rend your hearts, not your garments*. It's not about the surface, it is about having a change of heart.

But that does not mean to do it solo and not to engage in Sunday worship, or encounter Jesus in the sacraments, or be one with others who are doing practices that can help to support us in returning to the Lord. Jesus in the Gospel does not say “if you fast ... if you pray ... if you give alms” he says “when you fast ... when you pray ... when you give alms” - he assumes that we will do these things. But he wants us to do them for the reasons that will give life and not simply be a burden, and obligation, or a cause for show. This is a great time of year to do make a return to the Lord. The Church supports us with extra opportunities for prayer, learning, and other practices. We pray, fast and abstain together to give one another support, and we are called by the voice of God in the Scriptures to do something a little different. I encourage you to look at our bulletin insert and explore our website for more information on the spirituality of lent and on the opportunities available to support you engaging with the Lord more deeply. We heard in the second reading: *We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God ... Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*