

“The ‘Inner Room’: The Heart of Ash Wednesday”
Homily – Mass of Ash Wednesday
February 17, 2021; St. Mary’s Cathedral

Introduction

Once again, as we begin Lent, and as we do every year, we hear the exhortation from our Lord in the sixth chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel, which marks the practices that we highlight during the season of Lent: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. These are really the marks of the Christian life, especially almsgiving and other works of charity. And prayer – that’s a part of Christian life all the time. Fasting and other forms of penance are appropriate at certain times of the year and are a way of preparation for the great celebrations of the mysteries of our faith.

Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving

The Church has always understood – it is part of this cycle of fasting and feasting – that it is not really possible to feast truly joyfully without fasting beforehand, without a period of preparation, of self-denial. It enhances that sense of feast and celebration.

So, we enter into this time of almsgiving, prayer and fasting, the time to take these practices very seriously. Especially, I would say, the practice of fasting, which needs to take on some form of bodily fasting.

Fasting is also a way, in addition to being a spiritual discipline, a way of uniting ourselves spiritually with those who fast out of necessity, because they have inadequate access to food. At this time of pandemic it is especially so: many people are experiencing this food insecurity. Our almsgiving as well is a way of coming to their aid. And, of course, we keep them in prayer.

“Inner Room”

Again, this is from the sixth chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel. It is a part of the Sermon on the Mount – this famous Sermon on the Mount, which goes on for three chapters: chapters five, six, and seven of St. Matthew’s Gospel, beginning with the famous proclamation of the Beatitudes. The Sermon on the Mount is really a sort of a compendium of our Lord’s moral teaching, where we hear Him preach about what His disciples are called to be – the light of the world and the salt of the earth – and where He teaches us to turn the other cheek and to go the extra mile.

So, the context here is very important for understanding how He is urging upon us these practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Within this context of His moral teaching, these practices are meant to make us morally better people and, thereby, grow in spiritual excellence.

We need, then, to attend to the inner life. Lent is a time when we retreat with the Lord in the desert for 40 days, by means of our inner life. He speaks about prayer in this passage as going into your “inner room” – it is really the inner room of our soul – to enter into that inner space, to cultivate the soil that is there, so that it can be fertile for the seeds of the Gospel to take root and blossom. In this way, we can truly be that light of the world and salt of the earth.

Repentance and Self-examination

We begin by heeding the call to turn away from sin and do penance. And we use the external sign of that, on Ash Wednesday, with the imposition of ashes. Of course, we have to do that in a different way this year, due to the safety restrictions we must observe. And so, after

blessing the ashes, I will say the formula one time for the whole assembly, and then, as you come up for the ashes, Deacon Chris and I will sprinkle the ashes on the top of your head.

This sprinkling of ashes on the top of the head is also an ancient gesture, a way of receiving ashes and is actually the way the imposition of ashes is traditionally observed in some countries in the world. It is another way we show our responsibility in going that extra mile to ensure we protect public health.

It is a good time, this Lent, to reflect upon this, to go into that inner space, become morally better people, closer to God because it is time to examine ourselves. If during this time, when we have struggled to try to come together for Mass – we are grateful that we can come together now without fear of what is going to happen next – but, have we gotten lazy in our relationship with God? Have we become complacent because of the restrictions we have been laboring under?

Conclusion

Let us make that extra space for God during this Lent, and let these ashes be a sign of our sincere repentance of turning away from sin, cultivating that soil of our soul through these works of prayer, bodily fasting, almsgiving and other acts of charity, in solidarity with the poor, and in making space for God and the seeds of the Gospel to take root and blossom in our lives.