

Lectio Divina

SCRIPTURE READING + MEDITATION + PRAYER + CONTEMPLATION

“What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life?” ~Saint Benedict, from the *Rule of Saint Benedict* (73:3)

“The cross of ashes, traced upon the forehead of each Christian, is not only a reminder of death but inevitably (though tacitly) a pledge of resurrection. The ashes of a Christian are no longer mere ashes. The ashes of this Wednesday are not merely a sign of death, but a promise of life to those who do penance. And yet the ashes are clearly a summons to penance, fasting and compunction.”

EXCERPTED FROM “ASH WEDNESDAY” BY FR. THOMAS MERTON, OCSO

Monday, February 15 ~ Sixth Week in Ordinary Time

Holy Gospel: Mark 8:11-13 The Pharisees came forward and began to argue with Jesus, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. He sighed from the depth of his spirit and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Amen, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation." Then he left them, got into the boat again, and went off to the other shore.

Meditation: The people of Jesus' time expected that the coming of the Messiah would be accompanied by extraordinary signs and wonders. The religious leaders tested Jesus to see if he had a genuine sign from heaven to back his Messianic claims. False messiahs in the past had made extraordinary claims to attract their followers, such as claiming that they could cleave the Jordan River in two or cause the walls of Jerusalem to fall. Jesus knew the hearts of those who came to test him. They were more interested in seeing signs and supernatural phenomena than they were in hearing the word of God. Simeon had prophesied at Jesus' birth that he was "destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that inner thoughts of many will be revealed" (ref. Luke 2:34-35). Jesus gave them no sign except himself and the ultimate proof of his divinity when he rose from the dead.

Prayer: O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Contemplation: Never forget that the Lord reveals himself and makes his presence known to us in many ways – in his word and in the "breaking of the bread" in the Eucharist, in his church – the body of Christ, in his creation, and even in the everyday circumstances of our lives. If we seek the Lord, we will surely find him. And we can be confident that he will give us whatever we need to understand and carry out his will. Most of all, the Lord assures us of his daily presence and the promise that he will never leave us. Saint Theresa of Avila's prayer book contained a bookmark in which she wrote: "Let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you; All things pass: God never changes. Patience achieves all it strives for. Whoever has God lacks nothing, God alone suffices." Think about that for a moment, then ask yourself: Is God enough for you?

Tuesday, February 16 ~ Sixth Week in Ordinary Time

Holy Gospel: Mark 8:14-21 The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. Jesus enjoined them, "Watch out, guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." They concluded among themselves that it was because they had no bread. When he became aware of this he said to them, "Why do you conclude that it is because you have no bread? Do you not yet understand or comprehend? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and not see, ears and not hear? And do you not remember, when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many wicker baskets full of fragments you picked up?" They answered him, "Twelve." "When I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many full baskets of fragments did you pick up?" They answered him, "Seven." He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"

Meditation: The apostles set off in their boat across the Sea of Galilee only to discover that they forgot to bring enough food for their journey. What were they to do miles away from land and any place where they could buy food and supplies? They were anxious of course, and this was right after Jesus had performed the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes where the disciples fed more than four thousand people (ref. Mark 8:1-9). Jesus knew the trouble in his disciples' hearts even before they could speak. Jesus dealt with their anxiety by first warning them to not fear what can harm the body rather than what can destroy the very heart and soul of their being.

Prayer: O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Contemplation: One might wonder why Jesus told his disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod? To the Jewish person leaven was a sign of evil. It was a piece of dough left-over from a previous baking. In due course it fermented and this fermented dough became leaven. Fermentation was associated with decomposing rot. Jesus warned his disciples to avoid the evil influence of the Pharisees and of Herod who sought their own counsels rather than the will of God. As the apostles continued to worry about their lack of bread, Jesus reminded them of his miraculous provision of bread in the feeding of the four thousand. He then upbraided them for their lack of trust in God. "Do you still not understand?" It's easy to get preoccupied with the problems and needs of the present moment and to forget the most important reality of all – God's abiding presence with us and his abundant provision for our lives as well. Thus when you pray, do you pray with joyful confidence, "Father, give us this day our daily bread?"

Lent begins tomorrow: We should remember that Lent is not an isolated personal affair of our own. The Church avails herself of the whole of the mystery of redemption. We belong to an immense concourse, a great body in which we are united to the whole of humanity which has been redeemed by Christ. The liturgy of this season does not fail to remind us of it. This, then, is the meaning of Lent for us: a season of deepening spirituality in union with the whole Church which thus prepares to celebrate the Paschal mystery. Each year, following Christ its Head, the whole Christian people takes up with renewed effort its struggle against evil, against Satan and the sinful man that each one of us bears within himself, in order at Easter to draw new life from the very springs of divine life and to continue its progress towards heaven. (Excerpted from *The Saint Andrew Daily Missal*)

Wednesday, February 17 ~ The Beginning of Lent **Ash Wednesday ~ A Day of Fast and Abstinence**

Holy Gospel: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 Jesus said to his disciples: "Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father. When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you."

Meditation: Why did Jesus single out prayer, fasting, and almsgiving for his disciples? The Jews considered these three as the cardinal works of the religious life. These were seen as the key signs of a pious person, the three great pillars on which the good life was based. Jesus pointed to the heart of the matter. Why do you pray, fast, and give alms? To draw attention to yourself so that others may notice and think highly of you? Or to give glory to God? The Lord warns his disciples of self-seeking glory – the preoccupation with looking good and seeking praise from others. True piety is something more than feeling good or looking holy. True piety is loving devotion to God. It is an attitude of awe, reverence, worship and obedience. It is a gift and working of the Holy Spirit that enables us to devote our lives to God with a holy desire to please him in all things (Isaiah 11:1-2). The forty days of Lent is the annual retreat of the people of God in imitation of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. Forty is a significant number in the scriptures. Moses went to the mountain to seek the face of God for forty days in prayer

and fasting. The people of Israel were in the wilderness for forty years in preparation for their entry into the promised land. Elijah fasted for forty days as he journeyed in the wilderness to the mountain of God. We are called to journey with the Lord in a special season of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and penitence as we prepare to celebrate the feast of Easter, the Christian Passover. The Lord gives us spiritual food and supernatural strength to seek his face and to prepare ourselves for spiritual combat and testing. We, too, must follow in the way of the cross in order to share in the victory of Christ's death and resurrection. As we begin this holy season of testing and preparation, let's ask the Lord for a fresh outpouring of his Holy Spirit that we may grow in faith, hope, and love and embrace his will more fully in our lives.

Prayer: Grant, O Lord, that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service, so that, as we take up battle against spiritual evils, we may be armed with weapons of self-restraint. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Contemplation: Do you hunger for God? Do you thirst for God's holiness? God wants to set our hearts ablaze with the fire of his Holy Spirit that we may share in his holiness and radiate the joy of the gospel to those around us. St. Augustine tells us that there are two kinds of people and two kinds of love: "One is holy, the other is selfish. One is subject to God; the other endeavors to equal Him." We are what we love. God wants to free our hearts from all that would keep us captive to selfishness and sin. "Rend your hearts and not your garments" says the prophet Joel (Joel 2:12). Use this Season of Lent to the fullest – embrace the laws of God and the teachings of Jesus Christ and His Holy Catholic Church. Undergo a conversion of mind and heart. Conform your will to God. With the help of the Holy Spirit, transform your minds and hearts to be led in God's way of truth and holiness – the one and only way!

Some Thoughts On Ash Wednesday: At the beginning of Lent, on Ash Wednesday, ashes are blessed during Mass, after the homily. The blessed ashes are then "imposed" on the faithful as a sign of conversion, penance, fasting and human mortality. The ashes are blessed at least during the first Mass of the day, but they may also be imposed during all the Masses of the day, after the homily, and even outside the time of Mass to meet the needs of the faithful. Priests or deacons normally impart this sacramental, but instituted acolytes, other extraordinary ministers or designated lay people may be delegated to impart ashes, if the bishop judges that this is necessary. The ashes are made from the palms used at the previous Passion Sunday ceremonies.

— *Ceremonies of the Liturgical Year, Msgr. Peter J. Elliott*

The act of putting on ashes symbolizes fragility and mortality, and the need to be redeemed by the mercy of God. Far from being a merely external act, the Church has retained the use of ashes to symbolize that attitude of internal penance to which all the baptized are called during Lent.

— *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*

From the very early times the commemoration of the approach of Christ's passion and death was observed by a period of self-denial. St. Athanasius in the year 339 enjoined upon the people of Alexandria the 40 days' fast he saw practiced in Rome and elsewhere, "to the end that while all the world is fasting, we who are in Egypt should not become a laughing stock as the only people who do not fast but take our pleasure in those days." On Ash Wednesday in the early days, the Pope went barefoot to St. Sabina's in Rome "to begin with holy fasts the exercises of Christian warfare, that as we do battle with the spirits of evil, we may be protected by the help of self-denial."

— *Daily Missal of the Mystical Body*

Thursday, February 18 ~ The Day After Ash Wednesday

Holy Gospel: Luke 9:22-25 Jesus said to his disciples: "The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised." Then he said to all, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. What profit is there for one to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself?"

Meditation: Quite simply, the cross of Jesus Christ leads to freedom and victory over sin and death. We then need to ask ourselves: "What is the cross which Christ commands me to take up each day as his disciple?" When my will crosses with his will, then his will must be done. The way of the cross involves sacrifice, the sacrifice of laying down my life each and every day for Jesus' sake. What makes such sacrifice possible and "sweet" is the love of God poured out for us in the blood of Jesus Christ. Paul the Apostle reminds us that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Romans

5:5). We can never outgive God. He always gives us more than we can expect or imagine. Are you ready to lose all for Christ in order to gain all with Christ?

Prayer: Grant us, O merciful God, protection in our weakness, that we, who keep the Memorial of the Immaculate Mother of God, may with the help of her intercession, rise up from our iniquities. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Contemplation: We need to ask ourselves: "What will I give to God in exchange for freedom and eternal life?" In thinking about this question, are you ready to part with anything that might keep you from following him and his perfect plan for your life? Jesus poses these questions to challenge our assumptions about what is most profitable and worthwhile in life. In every decision of life we are making ourselves a certain kind of person. It is possible that some can gain all the things they set their heart on, only to wake up suddenly and discover that they missed the most important things of all. A true disciple is ready to give up all that he or she has in exchange for happiness and life with God. The life which God offers is abundant, everlasting life. And the joy which God places in our hearts no sadness or loss can diminish.

Friday, February 19 ~ The Friday After Ash Wednesday

Holy Gospel: Mark 9:14-15 The disciples of John approached Jesus and said, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast much, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."

Meditation: What kind of fasting is pleasing to God? Fasting can be done for a variety of reasons: to gain freedom from some bad habit, addiction, or vice, to share in the suffering of those who go without, or to grow in our hunger for God and for the things of heaven. Basil the Great wrote: "Take heed that you do not make fasting to consist only in abstinence from meats. True fasting is to refrain from vice. Shred to pieces all your unjust contracts. Pardon your neighbors. Forgive them their trespasses." Do you hunger for more of God and for his holiness and for the abundant life he has to offer you?

Prayer: Lord, with your loving care guide the penance we have begun. Help us to persevere with love and sincerity. Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Contemplation: Do you ever find yourself hungering for God? We must remember that hungering for God and fasting for his kingdom go hand in hand. When asked why he and his disciples did not fast Jesus used the vivid picture of a wedding celebration. In Jesus' time the newly wed celebrated their honeymoon at home for a whole week with all the guests! This was a time of great feasting and celebrating. Jesus points to himself as the bridegroom and his disciples as the bridegroom's friends. He alludes to the fact that God takes delight in his people as a groom delights in his bride (Isaiah 62:5). To be in God's presence is pure delight and happiness. But Jesus also reminds his followers that there is a time for fasting and for humbling oneself in preparation for the coming of God's kingdom and for the return of the Messianic King. The Lord's disciples must also bear the cross of affliction and purification. For the disciple there is both a time for rejoicing in the Lord's presence and celebrating his goodness and a time for seeking the Lord with humility, fasting, and mourning for sin. If we hunger for the Lord, he will not disappoint us. His grace draws us to his throne of mercy and favor. Do you seek the Lord with confident trust and allow his Holy Spirit to transform your life with his power and grace?

Scripture passages (NAB translation) courtesy of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops;
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LENT
Pray + Fast + Give