

Ash Wednesday 2006

Reading I

[Joel 2:12-18](#)

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.
For gracious and merciful is he,
slow to anger, rich in kindness,
and relenting in punishment.
Perhaps he will again relent
and leave behind him a blessing,
Offerings and libations
for the LORD, your God.

Blow the trumpet in Zion!
proclaim a fast,
call an assembly;
Gather the people,
notify the congregation;
Assemble the elders,
gather the children
and the infants at the breast;
Let the bridegroom quit his room
and the bride her chamber.
Between the porch and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep,
And say, "Spare, O LORD, your people,
and make not your heritage a reproach,
with the nations ruling over them!
Why should they say among the peoples,
'Where is their God?'"

Then the LORD was stirred to concern for his
land
and took pity on his people.

Reading II

[2 Corinthians 5:20 -- 6:2](#)

Brothers and sisters:
We are ambassadors for Christ,
as if God were appealing through us.
We implore you on behalf of Christ,
be reconciled to God.
For our sake he made him to be sin who did not
know sin,
so that we might become the righteousness of
God in him.

Working together, then,
we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God
in vain.

For he says:

In an acceptable time I heard you,
and on the day of salvation I helped you.

Behold, now is a very acceptable time;
behold, now is the day of salvation.

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."

ASH WEDNESDAY

1 March 2006

Here's my question for Lent: How seriously do you take your spiritual life?

Paul wants us to be ambassadors of Christ. He urges us to be the people who speak for God, so that others can hear God's appeal and invitation through us, just as Christ came to appeal and invite us to God through him. This means we have to be converted, so that we look like the righteousness of God. In other words, when people see us, they will see God's goodness; there is no hypocrisy in our words and our behavior. He says that we have received the grace of God -- we already have it. Don't let it go to waste! Let it work in you, and let it work through you for the sake of others.

Consider how seriously you take your physical health. Most of us are more likely to respond quickly when we are in acute physical pain. When we have serious kidney disease, and our blood is slowly being poisoned, we agree to dialysis. When we're were bleeding seriously from a head wound, we agree to stitches. When we have serious abdominal pain and the ER doctor says we have appendicitis, we agree to surgery. We're inclined to do all we can to hang on to our physical life, even though we know that sooner or later it will end.

If our physical problems are not so painful or prominent, we're likely to let things go on for awhile. We keep overeating, we keep getting drunk, we smoke cigarettes, we don't exercise regularly, because the negative impact on our health is not so immediate or obvious. It's not causing so much of a problem that we're willing to make the effort to change.

Today the prophet Joel tells us that our hearts need some serious attention. These Scripture readings are a wake-up call about our spiritual health. Our hearts are divided and pointed in a variety of directions. Our desires spill out all over the place -- better job, different friends, sexier spouse, better behaved kids, new toys, more cash, longer vacations, less work, more fun, perfect health, more time, less stress, everything going our way. So many things we want,

and we even convince ourselves that we need some of them. When we give these various wants and needs too much attention, we arrange things and connive to get them; we get anxious and angry when we don't get them; we feel an increased urgency to get them, and an underlying sort of desperation grows when we go without them. These are the aches and pains that come from our hearts.

Joel's remedy is this: **Return to the Lord with your whole heart.** That can sound like one more thing to do, one more duty or obligation. But "loving God with our whole heart and soul" is not a burden laid upon us. It is a lifeline, our rescue from all the possible desires and wants that run amok in us. If we don't choose God first, then all sorts of other needs and wants conspire to rule our lives, or they live in conflict with one another, fighting for prominence and control. St. John of the Cross said that our desires weary and fatigue us; they are like restless and discontented children, who are always demanding this or that from their mother, and are never contented.

Joel tells us: **Rend your hearts, not your garments.** This is not a time for some minor superficial changes. It's a time for serious reflection about the real change that is necessary in my life. It is about radical laser surgery, not a band-aid. It is about making sure that we return to the Lord our God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment. Rending our hearts is not an action we carry out in fear, but something we do with the God's loving support. It is the conversion we undertake to purify our lives of all the false desires, all the attractions that fail to satisfy, all the unhealthy addictions, all the clinging attachments that get in the way of loving God with our whole heart and soul, with our whole mind and body. Rending our hearts is not adding a burden, but accepting the gift of salvation that is ours when we make God our heart's first desire, and all other wants and needs and desires assume their rightful lower place. The grace of God is already at work in you -- let it achieve everything that God wants to heal and create in you, for your sake and others.

So, you ambassadors of Christ, we begin
this season of Lent. How seriously will you
take you spiritual health?