

Ash Wednesday

February 26, 2020 St. Augustine Cathedral 12:10 Mass

It seems that no matter when “Ash Wednesday” falls, since it’s one of those “movable Feasts” that depends on when Easter is, it always feels like a surprise! We hear people say: “I can’t believe it’s Ash Wednesday already!” even though this year, Ash Wednesday comes pretty late. And yet, whether it comes early or late, it always comes---and today it has arrived, and it has brought all of us here to this Cathedral---and so many of our sisters and brothers in our Christian faith to their cathedrals, churches, chapels, or auditoriums around the world--- primarily to receive the sign of “Blessed Ashes”.

While these ashes that we will all take on ourselves certainly remind us of our mortality---as one of the prayer forms puts it: “*Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return*”---, the ashes are placed on our foreheads in the shape of a Cross, which is a sign of Jesus’ victory over sin and death. And so, while these ashes remind us of something that perhaps we don’t like to think about---the fact that one day we will all die our human deaths---these ashes also are signs of hope and trust in the Lord, who has already conquered those ultimate realities of sin and death, so we have Hope that we will live forever in the life of the world to come. And since we want to make sure that we are choosing to accept Jesus’ offer of living with Him forever in Heaven, we must make sure that we are making the right choices in this life which will allow us to accept Jesus’ invitation.

And that’s primarily what Lent is for. It’s a 40-day “retreat”, so to speak, that challenges us to pay particular attention to how we are living our lives, and to make whatever adjustments that are required to get us back on track, if we’ve wandered off course. And, if we’ve really gone astray and have stopped practicing our faith, Lent is the perfect time to come back to the Lord and start over again.

That’s what we heard in today’s Readings over and over again. During Lent, we hear a lot of words that have “re-“ as the prefix, such as: “re-pent”, be “re-conciled”, “re-new”, “re-solve”, and “re-turn”.

For some reason, as I’ve been preparing for Lent this year, and considering what “resolutions” I will be focusing on, that last word---“*return*”---is the one that has been grabbing

my attention. We “come and go” to different places each and every day. Our lives are made up of little journeys, and bigger journeys. Every day we get up, and prepare to go somewhere---to school, to work, to the store, to be involved in the responsibilities of each day; and at the end of the day, we “return” home.

Sometimes, we have to go on a trip---away from home for a day, or a week, or longer----and then our “return” home is something we usually anticipate, and depending on the nature of what has taken us away from home, we might be “longing” to return home.

While I was away from the Diocese last week, I happened to be in a place that had a sign where the “Exit” sign was that said: “Every ‘Exit’ is really only an ‘Entrance’ to someplace new!” I found that very fitting and somewhat profound. We’re always going from one place to someplace new, even if those “new” places are as familiar as our homes, because we come back there with new experiences.

But even more than our daily comings and goings, our whole life is a “journey”, and one day---at the end of our life journey----we will make that ultimate “return” to the Lord.

And so we heard in today’s First Reading with the Lord Himself, speaking thru Joel the Prophet, saying: “*Return to Me with your whole heart.....return to the Lord, your God.*” And the remainder of that Reading reminds us that there is an “urgency” to paying attention so that we are ready for that ultimate “return to the Lord”.

That’s what St. Paul meant in the Second Reading when he said: “*We implore you.....we appeal to you.....’Be reconciled to God....Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation.....Return to the Lord.*”

The resolutions that we make today of prayer, fasting, or works of mercy, should help us to respond to what we hear in the other prayer form when we receive the Blessed Ashes: to “*turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel*”. Sinful choices “**turn us**” away from God; our Lenten resolutions need to help us to find ways to “**re-turn**” to God.

Jesus tells us don’t pray, fast, or give alms like “the hypocrites do”---who do those things just for show, or so that others can see what we’re doing. No, Jesus tells us to keep this between “me and God”; “*don’t let your right hand know what your left hand is doing*”; “*go to your inner room, close the door, and pray in secret*”, “*when you fast, put a smile on your face-- don’t look glum or sad*”.

During these next 40 days, then, let us pray that, with God's grace and our firm resolve, we will stop turning away from the Lord through sinful choices, and *re-turn* to the Lord by loving God and neighbor with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength. When we do, then we will know what it means to *repent*, to be *reconciled*, to be *renewed* in Christ, to *resolve* to be faithful to the Gospel, and we will be ready to **return** to the Lord, each day. So that at the end of all our days, when we "exit" this world, we will "enter" into the new and never-ending Life with God in Heaven.

God bless you, now and always.