

Homily by Fr. Anthony Davis

“...Rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord...”

February 17, 2021

Ash Wednesday (Yr B)

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

Ash Wednesday is a combination of being hungry from fasting, the more somber and penitential tone of the new liturgical season, and the stunning number of people passing through the Church doors.

What explains the popularity of this ritual then? Why, without even being a holy day of obligation, does Ash Wednesday draw so many souls to Church? I think part of the answer is that death is something all of us are painfully aware of. The loss of family and friends, the tragic stories that populate our daily news, the cemeteries we drive by-death is all around us! When Holy Mother Church marks us with Ashes, therefore, she responds to a deep human need. We long to be told that the death we know awaits us, is not an awful collapse into nothingness. That's why Ash Wednesday is in truth a very "Hopeful Day". In other words, the Church doesn't just remind us that, "WE ARE DUST AND INTO DUST WE SHALL RETURN...", and then sends packing. Our Mother Church moreover call us to Repentance- "REPENT AND BELIEVE IN THE GOSPEL"- in order to renew the practice of our faith, so that death will actually be the greatest moment of our lives, i.e., the moment we meet our heavenly Father.

Life Message: So today, marked with a somber sign of our faith on our heads, we go out into the world, and bear witness to our broken humanity for the world to see. Hence the Cross/sprinkle of Ashes on our head is meant to leave a lasting imprint deep within, like a "SPIRITUAL TAATOO", that will linger, long after we complete this forty-day course of self-mortification/correction, called LENT.

This means, for us to have any hope of coming out on the other side renewed and reborn, change cannot be only SKIN DEEP. And so in today's 1st. reading Joel is urging us to: "Rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord...For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love..."(Joel 2:13).

In other words, the prophet Joel, insists that we should experience a complete conversion of heart and not simply sorrow for our sins. Indeed, in normal life, there is always a temptation to see Lent as a time of self-improvement, during which my focus is on myself. However, my sin shows me that my hope can never be in myself. My only hope is that someone save me. As St. Paul says: "I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want...Miserable one that I am!

Who will deliver me from this mortal body? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom.7:19,24-25).

Conclusion: Therefore, let our focus be not on ourselves, but on Jesus. Let’s turn towards Jesus Christ and beg for a renewed experience of his presence. For, he is the one who save us from our miserable conditions; it is his merciful gaze that awakens and transforms us.

Therefore, use the sacrifices and prayers of this Lenten Season of Grace, to open your heart, mind, and soul to what God has in store for you. So, “Rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord...”. And Paul also encourages us, “Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation”. And so, let’s take advantage of this season of grace and “Be reconciled with God”.

Amen.