

Ash Wednesday – March 1, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 5:30pm Mass – 735 words

Mass on Ash Wednesday, with its simple solemnity and the imposition of ashes, is certainly one of the more evocative celebrations of our Church year. We join as a community to express sorrow for our sins and embark together on the path of repentance and conversion. We thus support each other, recognizing that no sin is merely solitary, but always has an effect in the whole Body of Christ. And so, leaving here today, we will submit ourselves to discipline, making sacrifices and undertaking additional beneficial activities for the next forty days, with the goal of making some real progress in our relationship with God.

In the first reading, the prophet Joel, speaking for God, says to us, “Rend your hearts, not your garments”; in other words, the really important kind of change in our lives is not external but internal. It is not so much visible to others as to God. This same theme is found in the gospel, where our Lord exhorts us to keep our almsgiving, prayer, and fasting a private affair between us and God. The reality is, pride is always a temptation for us. If we externalize these aspects of our lives and make them visible to others, it is quite possible that we will hide them from God under the cloak of pride – under the cloak of “look at me, and how great I am”. And the result will be that no real inner change occurs.

Lent is a time to develop one’s interior life. Consider the filial spirit and intimacy behind the words in today’s psalm: “Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness.... Thoroughly wash me from my guilt.... A clean heart create for me, O God... Cast me not out from your presence.... O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.” These are the words of King David, who had sinned rather miserably; even still, he seeks God out with confidence in an intimate interior dialogue.

The more we look within and open our hearts to the Lord, the more we see the “unloveliness” of our lives; the more we see how much we need to repent. And not simply to seek forgiveness, but to make reparation: to restore the balance of justice and repair the harm that we have done. We also see, more and more, the need for a game plan going forward, and the strength – or virtue – to carry it out, so that we do not repeat our mistakes. This is precisely where almsgiving, prayer, and fasting enter in – done in the sight of the Lord and not of men. These means, given to us by God himself, are sure ways of making satisfaction for our sins and growing in the moral strength needed to avoid sin in the future.

St. Paul says in the second reading, “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God”. Who does not want to be reconciled to God? Yet it could happen that we are not, in fact, reconciled to him, if our Lenten observance remains merely on the surface. The ashes that we will receive shortly on the forehead are an important outward sign of the inner renewal we seek, that we seek to rend our hearts. They are an important show of solidarity as we undertake the task together. And they are also an important sacramental of God’s Church, which means that they bring with them a blessing – a claim on divine grace. May we truly claim that grace today and make a firm resolution about how we will carry out our Lenten observance, not merely on the surface but from the depths of our heart.

“Remember, man, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” – salutary words, words that we need to hear, lest we end up believing what our pride would delude us into thinking. Today is, as St. Paul says, “the day of salvation”; this season of Lent “is a very acceptable time”, a time when the Lord wishes to pour out special graces upon us so that we can journey towards a profound experience of the Resurrection at Easter, having died to sin and risen to new heights with Christ through the discipline of Lent. The word “Lent” means “springtime”; we humbly pray that this Lent may be for us a new springtime, a significant milestone in our walk with God.