

Ash Wednesday – March 6, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 6:30am and 5:30pm Masses – 575 words

In the first reading, from the prophet Joel, we heard: “Gather the people, notify the congregation; assemble the elders, gather the children and the infants at the breast... Between the porch and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep...”. The Church has chosen this as one of the readings for Ash Wednesday to drive home an important point: namely, that this time of Lent is one that involves the entire people of God – from the “infants at breast” to the priests standing at the altars. Prayer, penance, and charity are for all, at all times – not just for a portion of the year. But there is a fitting time – an “acceptable time” – each year, endowed by the Church with special graces, when we can endeavor these practices all together, as a people.

It has been observed that the season of Lent, comprised of about 40 days, works out to be roughly one tenth of the entire year. In that regard, we could look at it as a tithe given to God. Now wherever the tithe is spoken of in the bible – as it will be in this coming Sunday’s first reading – it is clear that what we offer to the Lord should be the first-fruits of all that we have. That is what is due to him – not whatever we have leftover. He wants our very best. And more than merely desiring it, he deserves it. Hopefully we have all decided on what we will offer him by now. Is it a pure offering? Will it help us to grow closer to him? All that we have is from him, and we recognize that we need his grace even to be able to offer it back in a worthy manner...

But the spirituality of the tithe also teaches us that God is not outdone in generosity. He will give us far more than we give him. If we give to him as a people, his blessings in return will multiply among all of us. Forty days is only a small portion of a year; it is a tiny portion of our lives on earth; and compared with eternity, it is nothing. Let us go into this Lent with firm resolve to finish what we begin, and to begin well what we intend to finish. The almsgiving, prayer, and fasting that we do should be offered discreetly to our Father, who will reward us. And knowing that our fellow Catholics and many other Christians, besides, are making a similar offering, will help to spur us on each day. Everyone, from littlest to great, can offer something.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return”. We will hear those words once again, as the ashes are imposed upon our foreheads in just a few moments. We receive the ashes as a symbol of our repentance; but those ashes are enriched beforehand with the Church’s blessing, to give us special graces that we need to follow-through with our desired conversion. May those graces richly help us this Lent to make a worthy tithe to the Lord, and to grow not only individually but as a community. The Lord is purifying his Church at this time; while some need greater purification than others, none of us is exempt. I again encourage you to offer your sacrifices to God for this purification. May this “acceptable time” of Lent be fruitful for us all.