

Homily of Ash Wednesday, 2024

Joel 2:12-18; Psalm 51:3-6, 12-14, 17; 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2;
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Ash Wednesday is the first day of the Lenten season, 46 days before Easter. However, Lent is 40 days since six Sundays in the season of Lent are not supposed to be fast days and are not counted. Each Sunday is a feast day, a mini-remembrance of Jesus' resurrection.

The 40 days of Lent represent the 40 years the Israelites' journey to the Promised Land, and the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert before his ministry. On our part, our journey and our desert are of REPENTANCE, FASTING, ALMSGIVING, and PRAYER. The first reading invites us, "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" (Joel 2:12-13).

What is the meaning of the ash? The ash, traditionally, from the burnt palms of last year's Palm Sunday that is marked on our forehead symbolizes contrition and repentance, which is why the day is called Ash Wednesday.

Ash as a sign of contrition and repentance goes back to the Old Testament. Job prayed, "I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). "... the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth. ... [The king] rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes" (Jonah 3:5-6).

We abstain from meat and food that contains meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday as an honor to the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. Abstaining from meat is also an act of contrition and penance.

REPENTANCE: When ashes are distributed, the priest or his assistant says; "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19). This reminds us where we come from and where we will return. "Then the Lord God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Gen 2:7). "For he knows how we are formed, remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103:13-14). Do we, ourselves, remember?

Or, the priest or his assistant says, "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel." This reminds us Jesus' first words when he began his ministry: "This is a time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15).

ALMSGIVING: Gifts from God are not only meant for us. God gives them to us to share with others, especially with the needy. Lenten observance must include works of charity. "Prayer with fasting is good. Almsgiving with righteousness is better than

wealth with wickedness. It is better to give alms than to store up gold, for almsgiving saves from death, and purges all sin.” (Tobit 12:8-10).

FASTING: There are reasons for Lenten fasting. It is a way of prayer as Jesus did (Matthew 4:2). It is a way of penance and repentance as the people of Nineveh did. It is a way of sacrifice and self-denial. Fasting is not only from food and depriving ourselves of necessities, it includes, as Pope Francis advises, our attitudes. He says,

- Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
- Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
- Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
- Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
- Fast from worries and have trust in God.
- Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
- Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
- Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.
- Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.
- Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
- Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

PRAYER: Why do we have to pray? We are not self-sufficient; we depend on God. Beyond praying for material things, we pray and look to God for our spiritual well-being and solidity. Further, prayer drives away the Evil One and his agents. “... his disciples asked him in private, “Why could we not drive it out? He said to them, ‘This kind can only come out through prayer’” (Mark 9:29). Jesus cautioned Peter, “Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31-32). He also cautioned his disciples, “Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41).

In addition to other spiritual duties and exercises, we are encouraged to attend Stations of the Cross, Lenten Retreat, Penitential Service, and Sacrament of Reconciliation. Again, from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday, we are invited to make a journey of REPENTANCE, FASTING, ALMSGIVING, and PRAYER. We are invited to a journey of faith and spiritual renewal.

We pray for a Spirit-filled and a fruitful Lenten season. Amen.

Fr. Martin Eke, MSP