

Homily - Ash Wednesday 2008

February 7th, 2008

Readings:

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

[Psalm 103:8-14]

II Corinthians 5:20-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

We gather on this fine February day to begin once again the journey of Lent. This journey begins with a simple, ritual gesture. It begins with the imposition of Ashes upon the foreheads. This serves as reminder of our mortality. We all share the gift of life. Yet life as we know it is but for a time. We are given a sharp reminder of that on this day when we are told: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

Though life as we know it is but for a time, in faith, we know that that is not the whole story. So this day also serves as a reminder of our accountability before God for how we live this life.

This Lenten journey will end in 40 days with our celebration of the death and resurrection of the Lord; our celebration of Easter.

As we begin this season, we center our attention and our prayer upon the words of Sacred Scripture proclaimed for us. This is what we hear.

"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*)

These words of the prophet Joel were uttered in a time of crisis, moment of decision, a moment of truth. It was occasioned by a plague of Locusts. The plague of Locusts, like any plague, disrupted all order in life. The Locusts came frequently.

In the face of one such plague, the prophet Joel exhorts the people to turn

to the Lord with their whole hearts.

“Blow the trumpet in Zion,
proclaim a fast,
call an assembly;
Gather the people,
Notify the congregation;
Assemble the elders,
gather the children and the infants at the breast;
Let the bridegroom quit his room and the bride her chamber.
...let the priests...weep, And say, “Spare O Lord your people...”
(Joel 2:15-17)

It is with this tone of urgency, and desperation, occasioned by a plague of Locusts, that the prophet urges the people to turn to the Lord.

These words and images are placed before us each year at this time to suggest to us how sin in our lives can be like a plague of Locusts. This certainly bears repeating. For we need only look around us, read the signs of the times and we see that we certainly have our plague of locusts descended upon us in the form of crime: especially lack of respect for human life.

This is no time to fix blame. It is time to stand honestly before God and acknowledge the things we do which are wrong... we know that they are wrong... yet, we do them freely... They are our own plague of Locusts.

We are tempted by them.

We give in to the temptation.

We commit the sin.

We may even, if rarely, confess the sin.

Yet, we return to the same pattern of sin.

This may be our own, personal, plague of Locusts.

It can disrupt the order of our lives. It may disrupt the order of home and family life. It may adversely affect the lives of countless others. It certainly distracts us from our true vocation in life which, the scripture tell us, is to be holy as the Father is holy.

And so the Church our Mother and Teacher, like the prophet Joel of old,

places before us the discipline of Lent...places before us the challenge of ongoing conversion of heart. "Rend your hearts not your garments," we are told. Surely, our public worship should not obscure the reality that our response to the call for conversion must be intensely personal and intimate and of course sincere.

I remind you that it is not just enough to be "in the Word." The Word must also be in us. It is not sufficient to be in the Church. The Church must also be in us.

Today's gospel mentions the three time-honored penitential practices for Lent...Fasting, Prayer and Almsgiving. However, the gospel issues a warning first of all. "Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them." The point is, do not perform righteous acts merely for others to notice.

Why? Because these external gestures are intended to express a much deeper reality. They are meant to express a desire for conversion of heart. That is the core message of the Gospel. No wonder we also apply the Ashes with the words: "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel." Remember the instructions of the prophet Joel. "Rend your hearts, not your garments."

Historically, Lent began as a reflection on the 40-day desert experience of Jesus...as he prepared for his public ministry. It also evokes the 40-year journey of the Exodus experience.

The image of the journey, the image of the pilgrimage is one which remains with us. It is said that:

"Lent is a journey of evolving, creative reflection which inspires penance and gives new impetus to every aspect of our commitment to follow the Gospel. It is a journey of love which opens the hearts of believers to our brothers and sisters and draws them to God."

To understand Lent as a journey of reflection which inspires penance and gives new impetus to every aspect of our commitment to the gospel is important. It is to see this penitential season as a time of personal renewal and conversion of heart.

To understand Lent as a journey of love which opens our hearts to our brothers and sisters and draws them to God, reminds us that we do not live alone. We live as part of a community. We have to be good neighbors, we have to be responsible citizens.

The Gospel for this day speaks of fasting, almsgiving and prayer. This gospel is but a continuation of the great Sermon on the Mount. Recall how earlier the gospel says: You are the salt of the earth but that salt must not lose its flavor. You are the light of the world but that light must not be put under a bushel basket. Care for others. Be concerned for others. Get to know others and their needs and concerns. Deepen the sense of community among ourselves. Let us make an effort to deepen the sense of community among us this Lent. Let us do so particularly at this time when there is still the need for healing of the wounds of partisan divisions which can threaten to overshadow our sense of civility and of decency and of mature citizenship.

We are asked to Fast and Abstain on this day. We are invited to have Ashes imposed upon us. We are challenged to take our devotional duties much more seriously throughout the next 40 days.

All these are ways of acknowledging the Locust of sin in our lives and doing something about it. Let us try, with God's grace, to turn away from sin and to live the gospel. That is what the Season of Lent is for. And for that purpose...

Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of Salvation!

Let us now begin this season together. Let us be faithful to the discipline of Lent and come to the celebration of Easter with joyful praise.