

Ash Wednesday Reading and commentary

Ash Wednesday Summary by Dale J. Sieverding: This is the day we go to Church and come home dirty! Instead of fasting and doing penance in private, this day, we proclaim our penance to the world. "Did you 'get' your ashes?" People will ask. It may be better to ask, "Did you 'mean' your ashes?" This day, the Church prescribes the chanting of the Litany of the Saints, the calling down of the saints that is used for the church's most solemn rites — baptism, ordinations, dedications, and in the giving of Viaticum to the dying. This day, the Saints are invoked as a Communion of witnesses/helpers who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith, and teach us from their lives, the risks and rewards of following Jesus.

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First Reading: Joel 2:12-18

Rend your hearts, not your garments.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Joel

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.
For gracious and merciful is he,
slow to anger, rich in kindness,
and relenting in punishment.
Perhaps he will again relent
and leave behind him a blessing,
Offerings and libations
for the LORD, your God.

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.
Between the porch and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep,
And say, "Spare, O LORD, your people,
and make not your heritage a reproach,
with the nations ruling over them!
Why should they say among the peoples,
'Where is their God?'"

Then the LORD was stirred to concern for his land
and took pity on his people.

The word of the Lord

Commentary: Joel 2, 12-18 by Maribeth Howell, OP: Each year, without exception, on Ash Wednesday we hear this selection from the book of Joel. Isn't it rather odd that the Church hasn't opted for greater variety on this occasion? Aren't there other texts that might speak just as clearly the message of repentance?

Of course the Hebrew Scriptures are filled with texts that call us to reform our lives. The prophetic literature, in particular, reminds us that we, along with our ancestors in faith, are not always faithful to the covenant. Yet, here in Joel, the call to change is especially clear and significant.

In this book, which was probably written some time after the Babylonian exile, we hear a prophetic voice that is deeply disturbed with Judah's current state. The opening verse of this chapter seems to have set the context for the words we hear today. The "day of the Lord" is coming and it is not presented as a day of joy, but one of darkness and gloom. Not to worry! All is not lost! There is time and the time is now!

These familiar words remind us that our God is always ready to welcome us home. And so, year after year, we are told to *return* to God with all our heart. We are reminded that God is far more loving and merciful than we can imagine. This message is for everyone! Each of us, young and old, is invited to come together as an assembly, as a people well aware of our sins, yet ready to be marked with the sign of God's love.

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 12-13, 14 and 17

✠(see 3a) Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness;
in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.
Thoroughly wash me from my guilt
and of my sin cleanse me.

For I acknowledge my offense,
and my sin is before me always:
"Against you only have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight."

A clean heart create for me, O God,
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.
Cast me not out from your presence,
and your Holy Spirit take not from me.

Give me back the joy of your salvation,
and a willing spirit sustain in me.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

Commentary: **Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 12-13, 14 and 17 by John Paul Heil:** Main Theme: We acknowledge our SINFULNESS and beg for God's MERCY. This responsorial from Psalm 51, the most famous of the seven Penitential Psalms, is a lament that prays for the removal of our sinfulness, the focus of the penitential season of Lent that begins today. This masterful and moving poem of lament, which we are invited to make our own, begins by appealing to the mercy and great compassion of God to totally and completely remove our sinfulness-- "wipe out my offense, thoroughly wash me from my guilt, and of my sin cleanse me."

With the psalmist we acknowledge that our sinfulness offends God. We empathize with the psalmist that "my sin is before me always," but we know that we ourselves can do nothing to remove it. Only God in his mercy and compassion can and will do that. We realize that we need not only an external removal of sin but an internal cleansing and

renewal--"a clean heart create for me . . . a steadfast spirit renew within me." Our sinfulness threatens to cast us out from God's presence and to deprive us of God's Holy Spirit. We pray for a restoration of knowing the joy of God's salvation and that God will sustain within us a "willing spirit" to do his will. Reassured of God's merciful forgiveness, our "mouth shall proclaim your praise!"

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Second Reading 2 Corinthians 5:20 - 6:2

Be reconciled to God. Behold, now is the acceptable time.

A reading from the second Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians

Brothers and sisters:

We are ambassadors for Christ,
as if God were appealing through us.

We implore you on behalf of Christ,
be reconciled to God.

For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin,
so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

Working together, then,
we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.
For he says:

*In an acceptable time I heard you,
and on the day of salvation I helped you.*

Behold, now is a very acceptable time;
behold, now is the day of salvation.

The word of the Lord

Commentary: 2 Corinthians 5:20 - 6:2 by Fr. Damien Dougherty, O.F.M.: The apostles deal with Christ's affairs in the midst of humanity through announcing salvation in his name as God makes use of them precisely for exhorting people to take advantage of the benefits of reconciliation. Therefore, it is with this goal in mind, that the apostles, as spokesmen for Christ, urge all men and women to avail themselves of the possibility of this harmony with God.

The most compelling motivation for deciding to enter into the design of God, to reconcile ourselves with him, is the status to which the Father had reduced his Son: he who, within his perfect innocence, had not had any experience of sin, was in some way actually identified with sin. First of all, by becoming a participant within sinful human nature with its sinful flesh (Rom. 8, 3) and, secondly, by then taking upon himself the iniquity of humankind for the purpose of expiation (Isaiah 53, 6) he made himself both united with the sinful human race as well as its victim for sin.

This dynamic served for the complete advantage of humanity in order that, through Christ, we could be identified with the holiness of God, actual participants in his sanctity, just as Christ had been a participant in some way in our sinful human nature. The result is that the righteousness of God will be communicated to us, "in him," due to his merits and, through union with him, to all who will be inserted into that vital union with his body, the Church.

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Gospel Acclamation See Psalm 95:8

If today you hear his voice,
harden not your hearts.

Gospel Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

Jesus said to his disciples:

“Take care not to perform righteous deeds
in order that people may see them;
otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father.

When you give alms,
do not blow a trumpet before you,
as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets
to win the praise of others.

Amen, I say to you,
they have received their reward.
But when you give alms,

do not let your left hand know what your right is doing,
so that your almsgiving may be secret.
And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

“When you pray,
do not be like the hypocrites,
who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners
so that others may see them.
Amen, I say to you,
they have received their reward.
But when you pray, go to your inner room,
close the door, and pray to your Father in secret.
And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

“When you fast,
do not look gloomy like the hypocrites.
They neglect their appearance,
so that they may appear to others to be fasting.
Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward.
But when you fast,
anoint your head and wash your face,
so that you may not appear to be fasting,
except to your Father who is hidden.
And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you.”

The Gospel of the Lord

Commentary: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 by Tom Conry: This is selection from the Sermon on the Mount and concerns practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. This particular outline was evidently a common way of thinking about what Christian praxis; for example, the same pattern shows up in the Gospel of Thomas. In these concerns we read the Matthean community's determination to produce "scribes for the reign of heaven" (Matt 13:52), that is, a group capable of interpreting the way of Jesus in light of the traditions of Moses and all the prophets. What is at stake is a new definition of honor, one that reconciles the story of Jesus with Judean religious beliefs and practices.

Matthew's conflicts with the Pharisees – conflicts that happened well after the time of the historical Jesus – give that group a bad reputation, one that is at least partly undeserved. The Pharisees of history also were concerned with the hypocrisy of ostentatious almsgiving; for example, the great Rabbi Eliezar is

recorded as saying "The one who gives alms in secret is greater than Moses our teacher" (Baba Bathra 6b).

Fasting is characteristic of mourning. The Day of Atonement (see the prescribed practices in Lev 16) was the most famous national day of fasting, and the prescription against public display may have reflected a Matthean resistance toward cooperation with religious establishment of its day. Zech 8:19 lists four additional occasions for a fast, and a fast could be called in time of national emergency (e.g. 1 Sam 14:24). What is crucial here is that fasting and mourning in first century Palestine were primarily political acts of resistance, not individual statements of ascetic pietism. Fasting was a way of saying that the present situation is intolerable, of suspending the normal table fellowship that was emblematic of ordinary communal life. It made physical the urgency of the reign of heaven.

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