

Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:12-13, 19

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

The changes of times and seasons are used by the Church to commemorate events in the life of the Savior, especially such as Christmas and Easter, and to teach Her members and get them to focus on some aspect of their lives as the Baptized. Lent is especially one of those latter times and seasons.

Now, don't get me wrong, there is still an event in the life of the Savior that is the particular focus of the season of Lent: Jesus Christ's Passion and Death, which will serve as the focus of the mid-week services here starting next week. Such should be proclaimed year-round, much as the rest of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection should be. After all, any particular event in the life of the Savior loses all meaning and purpose apart from the whole of the events of the life of the Savior. You can't have Good Friday without the Annunciation and Incarnation of the Son of God, which would be for nothing as regards salvation apart from Good Friday. Nevertheless, during this time of the Church Year, especially during Holy Week, the Passion and Death of Jesus come to the forefront of the Church's preaching and teaching.

For the Christian, the focus this season becomes even more introspective as you compare your lives according to and against the Law of God. And just like the Church's preaching and teaching, this is something that should be happening year-round. Nevertheless, these two things go hand-in-hand: the Church's preaching and teaching look especially to the Passion and Death of Jesus for your sins which is likely reason for you to do an especially harder look at your life against the Law of God to see your sins.

When you evaluate your life as the Baptized according to the Law of God—especially as found in the Ten Commandments—you find that you come up short, that you don't measure up, that you have not done what you should have done, that you have done what you should not have done, and so on and so forth. In other words, you find that you have departed in thought, word, and deed from God. You have sinned and forsaken the very Word of God, turned your back on what He has declared, and—dare I say it—turned your back on Him.

But that's when He calls out to you. You are still His Baptized, His son for the sake of the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, and He still loves you and wants you back. So, He says, "Yet even now, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD, your God!

Why? "[F]or he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love..." Your God wants you back! He wants you to turn your eyes on Him, to hear Him, to follow Him, and to be with Him forever. That's why He sent His Son to you, and continues to do so in Word and Sacrament, in order that you would be rent in the heart over your sin and by His mercy and steadfast love be forgiven. So He says through the Apostle, St. John, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) Let me say that as it is meant, not in the "If...then" way it is often heard: contrary to those who deny sinfulness, as the apostle mentioned in the previous verse, God is faithful and just to forgive those who acknowledge sinfulness, who return to Him, so to speak. In other words, those who deny any need for forgiveness do not receive it; Jesus did not come to call the righteous, but sinners. (cf. Luke 5:32)

Your lot in this life as the Baptized is to be a reproach among the nations. This can lead to doubt and sins. And this is especially true when you recognize that, at times, God sends the nations to make you a reproach. See what befell Job, and realize that it was God who allowed, maybe even sent, Satan to rob him of his family and goods and to afflict the man himself. Then, his friends stop by and basically think of him as reproachable. In all of this, Job did not waver; He remained faithful and true to God, just as God had told Satan he would.

So it is also with you. As far as the world is concerned, you are reproachable, and there will be times when it spares no words or hits to remind you of this. As I said, it's enough at times to lead to doubt and sinning. Take heart, dear Baptized, for God does not allow nor send this in order to push you away but to draw you close to Him. He uses this to teach you that your life is in His hands, not theirs and not your own, that it is far greater than whatever comes at you from this vale of tears. In other words, it is done to strengthen your faith, so that you would return to Him.

That's the deal with rending your hearts and not your garments. The outward show of mourning and lamentation of sin is fine, but more important than that is actual mourning and lamenting over sin. So, you have Lent, and Ash Wednesday to start it all, to remind you that you are dust, that you have sinned, to repent and return to God, rending your hearts, not your garments. If you want to wear sackcloth and ashes, if you want to weep and fast and lament, do it, they are fine practices meant to acknowledge your sinfulness, which you then come here to confess and receive the forgiveness. And you do that with an eye to the promises of God, which far outweigh any good you might find from this temporal life.

You come here to confess your sin and receive the forgiveness of sins, because you have a faithful and just God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Here, He washes you, face and all, removing the dust of this fallen creation from you and making you, again and again, a new man who lives before Him in righteousness and purity forever. It's a now-not-yet existence which always finds itself covered with the ashes of sins, but looks with hope to the promises of God.

Therefore, remember that Jesus is with you always, to the end of the age. And since Jesus is with you, you are of the Baptized in Christ, one whose life and death is wrapped up in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God who became flesh like you and died your death that you might live forever with Him. What you have here and now is only temporary. Your ills and worries and hard times will pass. Jesus is coming back to take you to Himself!

That's what you should always look ahead to, even and especially as you contemplate your life in this Vale of Tears according to the Law of God. You are in Christ. He does call you to repent, because He came for you. He calls you to return to Him, to leave behind the life of sin in this Vale of Tears. And all of this because He promises to take you to where He is, where He is preparing a place for you. (cf. John 14:1-3) Or, as He has said through the prophet Joel, as you heard this evening, "Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations." All of that is yet to come, in eternal life that awaits you who are in Christ, where you will no longer be a reproach among the nations, because you *are* forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.