

Homily - Ash Wednesday C

“Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned!” Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, the fact is that we are all sinners in need of God’s grace and forgiveness. Lent is a time to return to the Lord with all our hearts. It is the privileged moment of grace; as St. Paul declares in our Second Reading (2Cor 5:20 - 6:2), “Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”

God declares through Prophet Joel declares in our First Reading (Joel 2:12-18), “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....” This illustrates that God also wants it to be a communal repentance, transformation and healing. Everyone must be involved in all the Lenten Observances: the imposition of Ashes, the Lenten Retreat, the Penance Service and Reconciliation, the Stations of the Cross every Friday, the abstinence from meat, and the commitment to better stewardship of time, talent and treasure. Above all, all must take an active part in the Holy Week ceremonies and Easter Mass.

God invites us to repent and leave sin behind “with fasting, and weeping, and mourning.” He wants inward repentance, not outward show; for he says, “Rend your hearts, not your garments.” In our Gospel passage (Matt 6:1-6, 16-18), Jesus instructs us on how to make our Lenten observance of alms giving, prayers and fasting, a fruitful devotion acceptable to God. He is saying that, individually, we must avoid every form of hypocrisy. There is no place for seeking vain glory. We must not show off any good act in order to receive people’s praises.

We should be weeping for our past and present sins, not seeking applause from anyone. The good acts we do now are only past debts of our sins that can hardly be paid off. Hence, Scripture says that “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” in the eyes of God (Isa 64:6; NIV). Somebody owning Credit Card payments that are past overdue does not expect praises for trying to pay a very insignificant portion of the debt. The debt of our sins is too great that, alone, we can never pay it off. We can fast, pray and give alms forever and the debt will still be too much to pay. So let us not be carried away by the insignificant sacrifices we are called to make during Lent. Christ’s mercy and forgiveness is our ultimate hope.