



CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF KALAMAZOO

Office of Communications

215 N. Westnedge Avenue

Kalamazoo, MI 49007

269-903-0162 (direct)

Bishop Paul J. Bradley Ash Wednesday Homily

St. Augustine Cathedral

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I have to admit that I am very enamored of the G.P.S. system in my automobile. Being a relative newcomer to southwest Michigan, I can honestly say that I would be “lost” without my GPS system, which I have affectionately called “Angel”. It really acts like my Guardian Angel, helping to, literally, keep me on the “right paths”, and helping me to find my way when I don’t know where I’m going.

One of the features that I really like is when I make a wrong turn---when I don’t follow “her” directions (since the GPS has a very pleasant female voice), “she” just very calmly says: “Recalculating”, and then “she” simply finds me another way of getting to where I’m trying to go.

We come together today on this most important Ash Wednesday to begin a special Season of Grace----the solemn six weeks of Lent.

The derivation of the word “Lent” comes from the Anglo-Saxon word for “Spring”----a time of new growth and new life.

Lent is not a time of sadness, and drabness; it’s a time to “re-calculate” the directions of our lives.

The Church calls us ALL into this special Season to re-calculate not only the general direction of our lives, but also to:

- 1) **Re-mind** ourselves “who we are”;
- 2) To **re-new** our commitment to be faithful to our baptismal vocation to live lives of holiness;
- 3) To **re-member** that we are a vital and important member of the Body of Christ, united with all the other “members” and most especially with the Head of the Body, Christ the Lord;
- 4) And to be **re-conciled** with God or with one another against whom we might have sinned or from whom we might have been separated.

On this Ash Wednesday, all of us gathered here in this Cathedral Church of our Diocese join with fellow Christians throughout the world as we enter into these special and holy 40 days.

Shortly, we will come forward to have blessed ashes placed on our foreheads in the shape of a cross. The Cross reminds us WHOSE we are---we belong to Christ; the ashes also remind us WHO we are---sinful, and mortal, human beings who are on a Journey of Faith.

We are **in** the world---this is where we live; this is where we study, work, interact, make our livings, raise our families, and are involved in trying to make our world a better place. And so when we receive the ashes today, we are reminded that we need to keep “turning away from Sin” in our lives and to “believe in the Gospel”---the Good News of Christ.

But as much as we live **in** the world as Christ’s followers as faithfully and joyfully as we can, Ash Wednesday also reminds us that we are not **OF** the world. Our time in this world is limited. One day, known only to God, we will die. And so when we receive the Ashes, we might also be told to remember that we are dust, and one day, when we die---our human bodies will return to dust.

Ash Wednesday in many ways is a “reality check”---just like my GPS system when I make a wrong turn “recalculates” for me a new direction to get me to the right destination, that’s what Lent does for us. It reminds us of the path we’re supposed to be on as people on a Journey---which of course is following Jesus, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. It reminds us of the destination that we need to have clearly in mind, which of course is Heaven.

Lent is a time when God, through the Church, calls us:

To repent of the bad habits or sinful ways in our lives;

To be reconciled to God and to one another so that there’s no “roadblocks” standing in the way of a strong and primary relationship with God or other members of the Body of Christ;

To renew our commitment to keep living our lives faithful to the Gospel; and

To remind ourselves to grow in holiness along our journey.

That what our Scripture Readings were telling us today:

In our First Reading, we heard the Prophet Joel calling all the people to repentance---with a true sense of urgency; not when it’s convenient, or when you get some extra time---no, NOW.

We heard that same message in today’s 2nd Reading. St. Paul urges the Corinthians, and US, to not put reconciliation off. “NOW is the acceptable time! NOW is the day of salvation!” NOW is the time to be true ambassadors of Christ!

And in today’s Gospel, we heard Jesus urge us to use whatever means we can---almsgiving, prayer and fasting---to grow in holiness. Not for show (so that others might be impressed by my extra devotions); and not for wrong motives (like fasting to lose 10 pounds). In fact, Jesus tells us to “go into your inner room” when you pray, fast, or do acts of self-denial. In other words, we each need to look inside ourselves, at the depths of our beings, and there do what we know in our heart of hearts we need to do to grow in our Love for God and for one another.

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in his Message for Lent this year, told all Catholics that “the Church invites us to a sincere review of our life in light of the teachings of the Gospel”.

He went on to say (in his weekly audience earlier today): “With the distribution of ashes, we renew our commitment to follow Jesus, letting ourselves be transformed by his paschal mystery so that we may conquer evil and do good, and....be transformed by the grace of God.”

Lent is NOT a time of sadness or drabness or suffering; it’s a wonderful opportunity to “recalculate” the directions of our lives; it’s a Spring-time of renewal; it’s a time for 2nd, and 3rd, and 4th chances to get right the basic, and most important, of all life’s questions: Who am I? What really matters? What is my final destination? And how am I getting there? And if the answer comes back that we’ve made a wrong turn and we need to “recalculate”, NOW is the time to do it!

Let the blessed ashes we receive today not only be a reminder of our mortality, but more importantly, be the reminder that we have been claimed by Christ as His own, and through these 40 days leading to Easter, to realize anew that we have been saved, and, thanks be to God, that we share in the Victory of Christ over sin and death.

God bless you, now and always!