

## Ash Wednesday----March 1, 2017

12:00 Noon---St. Augustine Cathedral

We've turned the calendar from February to March, and at the same time, and as we begin this new month, we've also begun one of the most important Liturgical Seasons of the year---the Season of Lent. Lent is the Church's annual 40-day retreat, a season to pay more attention to our relationship with God and to take the steps to be reconciled with God and with neighbor.

Today is the day that launches us into this Lenten Season in pretty dramatic ways. Throughout the whole world on this day, people take time from their otherwise normal activities to come to cathedrals, churches, chapels, and to allow themselves to be marked with blessed ashes as a reminder of our mortality and of our sinfulness. When we receive that sign of the cross on our foreheads, we will be told that we have come from dust and unto dust we will someday return, or, that we need to turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.

In addition, this day is one of only two days in the whole year when we are obliged to fast between our 3 modest meals, and to abstain from meat as a common act of sacrifice that we all follow. These are fairly dramatic steps that we take today to begin this holy season: blessed ashes, a sign of our humility before God and as a silent witness before the world who will see those ashes throughout the rest of the day and be a reminder to them as well of our common mortality; acts of fast and abstinence, a sign of our willingness not only to deny ourselves of some physical pleasures, but more importantly, as a sign of our willingness to turn away from any appetites or inclinations which might lead us away from God and God's ways. These are not just dramatic steps that we take today, but ones that we hope and pray will help us, through whatever particular Lenten Resolutions each of us has made or perhaps we're still deciding on, to do what the Ashes we will soon receive reminds us: to turn away from sinful practices in our lives, and to replace those sinful acts with acts of mercy, charity, compassion and Christ-like love for one another throughout these next 40 days.

The Scripture Readings we've just listened to have an imperative sense of urgency about them. The Prophet Joel begins by speaking on God's behalf: *"Even now----return to Me with your whole heart---with fasting, weeping and mourning."* And then he goes on with "blowing the trumpet---calling an assembly----gathering the people---notifying the congregation" so that we can

have as our common prayer: *“Spare Oh Lord your people!”* St. Paul continues that same theme of urgency as he boldly stated: *“We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God!”*. He hastens to add that we can’t put that off; we need to do so here and now: *“Now is the acceptable time; Now is the day of salvation.”*

What we need to realize, however, is that the urgency is not because we have to convince God to be merciful to us; the imperative sense is not because if we don’t act now, God might change His mind. No, God constantly desires that we return to Him; there is absolutely no time limit on God’s offer of mercy. The imperative is aimed at us, urging us---all of us---to take advantage of this 40-day season to “turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel”.

How many Lents have each of us lived through? How many more Lents do we have to live through? The time for us to make whatever changes we need to make in our life is now---this Lent----these next 40 days!

In Pope Francis’ Message for Lent this year, he tells us that Lent is the season for us to renew what he calls “our encounter with Jesus”. And he tells us that we can do that by finding Jesus in prayerful reflection on God’s Holy Word, as well as in the Sacraments (such as possibly trying to get to daily Mass and to make a good Confession). But he also tells us that we need to find Jesus in our neighbor.

That’s what Jesus was talking about in today’s Gospel when He encouraged us in the traditional spiritual practices of Prayer, Fasting and Works of Charity. Those would make 3 great Lenten Resolutions: 1) to spend more time each day in personal prayer with Jesus---to find 15 minutes (or even 10 minutes or 5 minutes) in the morning as part of getting ready for the day, or at night before bed, or anytime during the day that might work to just “visit with Jesus” in praying the rosary, reading and meditating on the Scripture Readings for the day, or spending time in Eucharistic adoration; 2) fasting from eating between meals, or giving up candy or desserts, or other similar ways of fasting can be helpful; but we should also consider “fasting” from whatever it is that is a problem area in our lives. I think we would all agree that we’ve never experienced such a sense of division and polarization within our society as we do these days. And that division reflects itself in lots of ugly acts of violence, hate crimes, and very uncivil discourse among us. Perhaps we need to “fast” from any of those kinds of practices in our own lives. We might find it helpful to “fast” from social media if that distracts us from other responsibilities, or if it leads us to use language or discourse with others that is harsh or less than polite; 3) and of course our prayer and fasting will lead

us to be more compassionate to our neighbor so that we can willingly take on acts of charity for those in need.

Prayer---fasting----acts of charity; our reception of the blessed ashes and today's fasting and abstinence; all of our Lenten resolutions: everything that we do during this season of Lent is aimed at reconciling ourselves with God and neighbor, of "renewing our encounter with Jesus", and of helping us to continue living our lives as what our Opening Prayer today called a "campaign of Christian service", or as St. Paul told us today: *"to be ambassadors of Christ, God as it were appealing through us."*

May we take advantage of the urgent need and grace-filled opportunity these 40 days of Lent provide for us. May this Season of Lent be a time of grace and renewal for each of us and for all God's people, leading us to a glorious celebration of Easter Joy!

God bless you, now and always.