

# Ash Wednesday

2005

Joel 2:12-18

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

II Cor 5:20B6:2

Mt 6:1-6, 16-18

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In the Philadelphia Roman Catholic churches, Ash Wednesday and Palm Sunday are two of the busiest liturgical days of the year. What is this about? Is it because something is given out free in our churches on these days? Unlike when receiving the Eucharist, people aren't required to be in the state of grace when receiving ashes or palm. So, all of us sinners flock to church on these days and take something tangible home with us.

Ash Wednesday is also a day when even sophisticated business men and women seem to appreciate receiving a big smudge of ashes on their foreheads. Strange, the one day the Gospel advises us, "Don't parade your holiness. Wash your faces. Pray in secret," and we do just the opposite. It must be Christian paradox or humor, yet I doubt if God minds. He probably just shakes his head and says, "My wonderful crazy children!"

More seriously, as I understand it the theme for today is: be concerned about your heart versus your face/clothes/external appearance. Focus on your interior versus your exterior. More specifically, notice your interior *motivation* versus doing actions to impress others. The Gospel applies this to our prayer: "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." What are we really being told here?

The key message is not whether we pray alone or with others, but whether we pray with an *agenda* or not. It is far more difficult to come before the Father in secret *and who knows our secrets* while at the same time trying to shmooze him as we can often do with each other. So, today, even here in Church, we can try and pray *in secret*, i.e. pray in transparent honesty before God who loves us and wants us to live our deepest calling as human beings.

(pause)

Do you remember the "Perfect Act of Contrition"? The nuns taught us this prayer to say if we were in danger of dying so we could go straight to heaven if we did die. In this prayer--especially good in emergencies when a car was hurtling down upon you in the street--we were urged to be sorry for our sins not to avoid hell, but because our relationship with God was somehow not right. In other words, we were to pray to God as a person (a Subject), not just someone we use with an agenda (an Object). We can understand how a "Perfect Act of Contrition

is difficult to accomplish anytime, but especially if we are about to die. It's hard not to have an agenda when the flames are flickering at our feet.

Well, we can try to pray in secret, i.e. without an agenda this Lent, can't we? As well as relating with God this way, we can try to relate to others more personally as well, rather than trying to manipulate them for money, sex or power for instance. We can even reconcile our wounded relationship with God by trying to reconcile our wounded relationship with the earth. What could this mean?

In the sacred ritual with the ashes that we will celebrate in a few moments, each of us will approach the altar and receive ashes on our foreheads made in the sign of the cross. This ritual links us with a penitential rite from the ancient Jewish tradition. In that time, when things were going bad for them, the king and the whole nation around him did penance for their wrongdoing by fasting and mourning and sitting in sackcloth and ashes. Why would they do this? They wanted to show that they were rending their hearts and not just their garments. By these acts of penance, they hoped that God would see that they were truly sorry for their sins and relent in his anger at them. Maybe our nation and our president could do something like this today. Perhaps if the most powerful nation did so as an example, other nations would be so inclined rather than all of us blaming one another. In fact, such a public ritual might be the only thing that brings our nation and the community of nations together.

It'll never happen, you say? Well Christians don't have to wait for this, do we? We can begin it right now. Even though we are doing so in public, we can still pray in secret to the Father, i.e. without an agenda, political or otherwise--as we do so.

A way that we can pray in secret and actually make a difference this Lent could be thus: imagine in your heart the desperate need of the entire human family today to reconcile with the earth. There is not time enough to mention all the ways that the earth, our Mother earth which God created in love, is being ravaged by us in our mad dash to produce and succeed. Each of us can think of one concrete way that we can make amends to the earth this Lent for our abuse. And not just for some political reason, but to see it as a concrete way of reconciling with God. You can be sure that God will be delighted if we do so.

When the priest says then, Remember man/woman, that you are dust and that you shall return to dust, you might substitute the word "earth" for "dust" in the secret of your heart. If we do so and mean it, we will actually change something deeper than the externals this Lent--the externals of washing our hands, of cleaning our houses of "dust," of wearing purple vestments and smudging ourselves with ashes. In its own way, it'll be a Perfect Act of Contrition.

It is Lent once again. We are entering into the great season where we celebrate that God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son to be one with us in our human flesh and blood. This Son of God, Jesus Christ, died for us and shed his blood into our earth once long ago. In so doing, he forever made our bodies and the earth holy. Perhaps His blood could even be mixed

with the ashes you receive on your forehead. As you receive these sacred ashes then, I would invite you to say in the secret of your heart, *Remember, I am from the earth, and I shall return to the earth.*<sup>@</sup> In the secret of your heart you may here in response, *My wonderful crazy child.*

Have a blessed Lent and Happy Easter!