

Joel 2:12-18

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

I Cor 5:20 - 6:2

Mt 6:1-6, 16-18

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A few months ago I got caught by the iPod bug. I saw an advertisement for the new iPod Nano in a magazine and I fell in love with its size, its capacity to hold all of my music collection, and its technological beauty. So I turned to the experts of the latest in technological innovation, my students. After class I asked a group of kids what they thought of the Nano, and one replied, "If you got one of them it would really raise your cool-factor on campus!"

Trends, fads, and phases, all of the accessories like the iPod, are evidence of what is all the rage with people in the know. It is in the midst of this culture, living in all its rich diversity and seemingly endless opportunity, that we as Christians begin our preparation for the most significant celebration on our Church calendar, Easter. Ash Wednesday is the portal of ash and introspection which calls each Christian to enter into a period of ardent self-examination, hopeful repentance, and a deeper awareness of our need to pour out onto others the generosity which God has poured down upon us. In this season of Lent we are invited to recognize that it is often our attraction to that which is fashionable which most prevents us from living a life more deeply rooted in Jesus Christ. A life shaped by charity, love, forgiveness, compassion, understanding and a longing for peace, rather than a life controlled by fads and passing trends.

The rhythm of this season, which we Christians joyfully revisit year after year, is heralded by iconic readings, scriptures which we anticipate and associate with the Lenten opportunity to radically alter our personal and communal perspective of God's plan for salvation. These sacred texts set the tone for a season of introspection, and create a concrete framework for us to allow the all powerful grace of God to renew us and convert us despite our human limitations and resistance. In our first reading, from the Book of the Prophet Joel, we greet the season with the magnificent words of invitation to return to God with our whole heart. What a prospect! The idea, the possibility, that we could live more deeply in the awareness and potency of God! The prophet draws us a map to follow through Lent, pointing us to the interior roads of introspection and real self-evaluation. Tough stuff, for when we look inside we must be honest with ourselves and self honesty, when done with conviction, almost always leads to self accusation and a recognition of the need for change. However, when we identify the fads to which we willing give ourselves we begin to find the answer to just what it is that prevents us from living a life of integrity, more truthful to ourselves and others, a life closer to God's plan for us designed in our initiation into the faith.

And yet, our faith is never simply a self-help program, never merely an opportunity to experience personal growth. It is, instead, always aimed at making the world a better place, spreading the Good News, and coming to the aid of those most in

need. For as Paul writes today in his letter to the Corinthians, “We are ambassadors for Christ, God as it were appealing through us”. Consequently, you and I bear the image of Christ in every encounter we have, bringing his message, his perspective, into the most ordinary as well as the most extraordinary moments of our lives. In our baptism our parent and godparents traced the sign of the cross on our foreheads, allowing us to walk through life claimed by Christ and thus marked with his image for other to see. Lent provides for us the opportunity to ask the questions, ‘How do I represent Christ? Do others see Christ in me?’ and, perhaps most importantly, ‘Is Jesus’ humility, love, compassion, forgiveness, and wisdom what lives at the core of my heart of hearts?’

Today’s Gospel reinforces this spiritual precept that the journey inward is our most important journey. Echoing the words of the of the Prophet Joel in the first reading, Matthew warns us that this Lenten opportunity for conversion should not be one of exterior display. And yet, in one of the tensions of being teachers and preachers of faith, our example of faith must be witnessed in some way to those we are responsible for instructing. Our own Lenten practice, our own penitential choices, must in some way be visible in order to encourage the weak and lift up the downhearted. It is in this very real spiritual and practical tension that we recognize our call to bridge that which is interior with that which is exterior.

We are blessed with an institutional character as a Church and with the abundant graces poured onto us through a tradition of rich history of intense commitment to the message of Jesus. We depend on this institution to both guide us, and protect our faith. But our laws, our precepts, our Christian commission to be as Jesus was must be written in our hearts, not simply in catechisms. The only way that this can be achieved is by recognizing ourselves, in a very personal way, as worthy of Gods love. Easier said than done. For when we see ourselves as forgiven, as worthy, as a true child of God, our capacity to envision others in a similar way expands. So much of life is based on judgment. Judgment about who is worthy of the protection of the law, worthy of our respect, worthy of our concern. We are encouraged, in very secular ways, to judge those who live outside of what we consider right or normal. For some strange reason we feel more comfortable judging than accepting, more comfortable focusing on the shortcomings of others than ourselves. I believe that we turn from self-evaluation in favor of criticism of others due to some erroneous notion that we are not worthy. For when we know ourselves as accepted, when we actually accept ourselves in all our finitude, we cannot help but accept others and their limitations.

Finally, in this challenge to grow interiorly in order to affect a different world, there is a hope which lives at the center of this season. A hope that on the other end of Lent, when we greet the Risen Lord in the celebrations of Easter, we will be different than when we began. So as we enter this sacred season, marked with the ashes of this day, let us pray that Jesus will further lift the veil which prevents us from knowing ourselves and responding to others, and fill us with a wisdom and generosity of spirit which dispels trends, which transcends fads. A transformed heart that offers a life of gentle acceptance; a life of humility and love to which others might respond upon seeing us renewed, ‘He looks just like Jesus’.