

FIRST READING: Joel 2:12-18

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Joel:

Even now, says the LORD, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment. Perhaps he will again relent and leave behind him a blessing, Offerings and libations for the LORD, your God. 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; Let the bridegroom quit his room and the bride her chamber. Between the porch and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep, And say, "Spare, O LORD, your people, and make not your heritage a reproach, with the nations ruling over them! Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" Then the LORD was stirred to concern for his land and took pity on his people.

The word of the Lord.

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

Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense. Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me.

Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

For I acknowledge my offense, and my sin is before me always: "Against you only have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight."

Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me. Cast me not out from your presence, and your Holy Spirit take not from me.

Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Give me back the joy of your salvation, and a willing spirit sustain in me. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

SECOND READING: 2 Corinthians 5:20–6:2

A reading from the second Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians:

Brothers and sisters: We are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him. Working together, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says: *In an acceptable time I heard you, and on the day of salvation I helped you.* Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus said to his disciples: "Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father. When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But 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. "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Ash Wednesday 2022

Things sound dire in Joel's community. Those who could be happy find themselves mourning. Those who could be secure face anxiety. Those who are healthy find themselves ill or at least ill at ease. Something seemingly very bad is happening with no signs of relenting. This catastrophe, at least in this passage, is both unnamed and apparently becoming worse. Sound familiar in any way? If so, what God wants may be relevant for us as we try to cope with a similar state of our lives.

Return to me with all your hearts God invites. That's very clear. How can we do this? With prayer, fasting and mourning. Why these? What do these things add to God who created the cosmos, you and me? God is infinite, eternal and unconditional. Do these things really benefit God? It's like giving your mother a gift, as a kid, on Mothers' Day. What did a trinket or card really do? It was a way to express love. In the long run, a trinket got put in a drawer; the card tossed. It expressed love for mom and us.

Everybody hurts. Everybody cries. Everybody faces troubles, trials and problems. What does turning to God actually do? We remember that God is always as near as the thought we make. God never leaves us; while God knows the state of our lives. God always loves us despite what we think, feel and do. How can we find relief from pain? We can admit it to others. When we do, we can discover people's compassion. When we are weak and let people know we can rely on others' strength for help. When we cry, with others we can find someone to embrace us as we cry on their shoulders.

Praying we do as often as we remember God. Through prayer we are in God's presence for he's nearest to us in those moments. Why fast? We can find ourselves alone and separated from those we love. We fast in that sense anyway. To acknowledge our lack we gain God's presence.

People are only as little as a call, text or encounter away. Life will only be rich for us when we reach out having experienced our deepest need.

Why mourning? All of us mourn and in our own way. To hold it in is not healthy. What happens at a wake when we gather together having lost a loved one? We offer condolences, prayers and presence to one another. That's a communal act when we experience the loss together. We may mourn, but we also remember. As we remember together, our shared memories can be moments of joy as we envision our loved one at their best with us. People may cry, but they also laugh. The person may be dead and we'll never see, hear or touch them again. What remains in us is our memory of all the good they gave us. In this way they remain as part of us still. The wake is the first step to heal. The healing of our loss may happen over a long time, but as we remember them we glimpse eternal life and our hope of what's in store for us in Christ. All of us have known this. We see with eyes of faith.

The Psalm tells us of the effects of our sins on us and those around us. The process of repentance is an active experience for us to know God within us. The response is plural, "We have sinned," it says. The psalm is singular in expression, "Against you, only, I have sinned." As a community, our actions have an effect. Some of our sins we commit may be private ones, but we also do things that can be hurtful to others. When we remember the Ten Commandments, only three that we can break are personal ones and are against God alone. The other seven involve other people and affect the community.

What did the Psalmist find as a result of his prayerful reflection and confession? He feared alienation from God. What he found instead was something that opened his lips so he could sing God's praise. What happened? He began in shame and grief. He ended in joy as God forgave. New life to try again; renewed as the result of the process.

I maintain that what the Psalmist proclaimed was the process of reconciliation. As with our relationships with others, forgiveness can happen before people say I'm sorry and I forgive you. God forgives us whenever we are sorry. Reconciliation, however, is in the context of a relationship involving saying the words. This is why we celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in normal times and not during a pandemic, with private confession of our sins. We have to say, I'm sorry and hear I absolve you. The Psalmist got it right, even before Jesus was born.

I find it interesting in the way Paul spoke to the Corinthians. "We are ambassadors for Christ," he wrote. This wasn't Paul the apostle, elder or overseer speaking. I will note that an apostle means a missionary. We can translate elder as priest and overseer as bishop. That's how the ancient Greek Paul spoke translates into English. They all share the same faith in Jesus, the same mission to live and spread the good news and the same service of others. They were in Christ as brothers and sisters as God's children by faith. It is also our acceptable time; now. Can we hear him? This is relevant as we move from our local Church to a wider one. Christ renews us as his Church. That's the heart of Paul's preaching today.

Jesus also has three ways to turn to God with all our hearts. Two are the same as Joel's; prayer and fasting. One differs. Jesus did not tell anyone to mourn. Instead he asked people to give alms. What are alms? It can be interpreted as support of the poor by people who can. Does anyone remember Mite Boxes?

They were given to kids by teachers, catechists or priests at the beginning of Lent. We were supposed to sacrifice our allowance and put the money into the box which would be collected when Lent was over. Depending on how old I was, I got a nickel, a dime and then a quarter a week. In the late 1950s and 1960s it went a lot farther than it would today. There was a trick to it. A dollar or two of pennies weighed a great deal more than a dollar of nickels, dimes, quarters or singles. After forty days of Lent, it was the weight not the amount that mattered. Kids can work spin too.

Alms can also be better interpreted as service to others. Service of others is how we define ministry. Jesus preached this gospel as part of his service to others. His service extends to us as we read or hear him. I've already reflected on prayer and fasting. Service is at the heart of what Church is all about. We are all in service of one another. We serve God as we serve each other. Jesus added something else to his list. It's the motive of the believer. Prayer, fasting and alms have no significance if our motives are self seeking, like the hundred pennies in my mite box.

Jesus has posed his plan to deepen God's relationship to us as we deepen our relationships with him and one another. What Jesus has described is how the Church can work. When it does, it can be powerfully beautiful as it reveals the mystery of the Kingdom of God and how we will be transformed in it. It's only a glimpse. Much of the time we stumble and bumble through this life and in God's presence. Institution is no substitute for the love God is. Too often we can go through the motions.

Fasting for us can be giving something up. Candy, dessert, beer and booze can always top the list. We can see the fast as a deprivation. I've known people, myself at times, who would fastidiously give up their delight during the week, while on Sunday make up for lost time. Some feel that since every Sunday is a celebration of the Easter Mysteries that they are exempt that day from their fast. These days I focus on what I can do positively that can make a difference. How can I listen better? How can I ease another's burdens? In doing things like that, I open myself up to others. God seeks us to deepen our relationship with him as we deepen them with others. Then the fast is not a personal deprivation but to know others more deeply. Either way, it is God's grace that God gives us to succeed and in return.

Prayer, fasting, mourning and service of others are first for ourselves to deepen God's relationship with us. They are gifts that God offers us to deepen our relationships with others. They are also the means God can use for us to express our hurt, flaws and limits. For only in God's love and through God's grace will we change. As we believe, God has saved us and will forgive our sins. This is God's gift that Jesus has won for us by his Holy Cross; redemption and new life. God is the center of our prayer, fasting, tears and ministry. God is our center.

May the ashes we receive proclaim our need for God.

James D. Beath
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