

Homily – Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Last year in my homily for Ash Wednesday I said, “The season of Lent commences today with the imposition of ashes. The ashes that we use today are an ancient symbol of our repentance and remind us that we are fragile, organic beings that often lament the distant relationship with have with God.”

This year however, we are apart on this sacred day, separated once again by caution around gathering during the pandemic. No gathering, no imposition of ashes. I wonder how you feel about that today? Will the lack of ashes, usually imposed during our solemn liturgy, dilute in any way the sacred remembrance on this first day of Lent. Will the lack of the outward sign of our mortality lessen how you spend the day. I hope not.

What is most sacred about Ash Wednesday is that it marks the beginning of our observance of a Holy Lent, it reminds us that we are mortal, flesh and blood, temporal beings that exist on the earth anywhere from an hour or two, to more than 117 years, as one French nun has reached this year. None of us knows how long our lives will be but one thing we do know is that they will end, that we are not gods but mortals, made of the dust of the earth, and destined to return to the dust of the earth after our lives end. There is a certain humility to appreciating the limitations of our very beings.

As we start into our Lenten journey today let the words of Jesus be carried in our hearts as a guide for each day of this season. The words of Jesus from the Gospel according to Matthew remind us that reconciliation with God requires us to remain humble and reverent in our giving of ourselves, and our gifts to God and to the church.

Jesus asks us to pray in quiet where God will connect with us in the stillness and silence of our prayer. We are to fast in a way that does not draw attention to what we are doing. In some way today, staying at home, finding a quiet space to observe the service is more fitting with Jesus’ teaching than gathering for corporate worship.

We are also to focus our lives on the values of the kingdom – love, justice, reconciliation and compassion, and on our ongoing relationship with God and each other. These are the treasures that will be most valuable to us as we live out the rest of our lives.

Lent is a season of communal and personal penitence that prepares our hearts and souls for our most holy season, that being the passion of our Lord, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

To help us orientate ourselves for this season it is prudent for us to reflect on our relationship with God. Who are we in relationship to God, and who is God in relationship to us?

When Jesus Christ came into the world we gained a larger insight into God’s existence and into God’s love for us. Through scripture, with the accounts of the prophets, the apostles and disciples of Jesus, we have testimony from witnesses and communities about their relationship with God,

including all the struggles and joys. And now through the Holy Spirit we have an advocate with God, a line of communication, if we are only able to connect.

God sent Jesus into the world as an instrument of reconciliation through love, compassion, and mercy. We drift away from God because we are fallen and broken people. We drift away, become aware of our longing for God, repent and then come back, seeking God, before we find ourselves drifting away again. The cycle of our life repeats and each time God is there to welcome us back.

Our sin becomes a disturbance in our relationship with God. Our fallenness, our brokenness, our constant repeating of all that stands in opposition to the essence of God, puts us away from the heart of this one crucial relationship in our lives. No other relationship exists where one half offers the full depth of love, compassion and justice as God does with us. No other relationship, period!

This relationship with God is the core of our creation, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. Our acknowledgement though is within our own power if only we have hearts open to reconciliation. God is a constant in our relationship but we are not. So, we need a reminder to realign ourselves with God's creative intention.

This is the season. This is the season that is our annual reminder. This is the season that has been repeated for centuries in the church. By your participation in observing this sacred day you join with millions around the world in seeking to realign your lives with God.

God has freely offered us the grace of reconciliation through Jesus Christ and it is now up to us to respond with penitence and obedience, and with hearts desiring a deeper connection.

Paul reminds us not to accept this grace in vain but to do something with it, to respond appropriately. To do it now! "See now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation," he says. There are no barriers to God's grace but our own. We are commended as servants of God, Paul says, through our endurance, hardships, sleepless nights, by patience, genuine love, truthful speech and the power of God.

We are blessed that the ancient church established this holy time of penitence and reconciliation as a time of preparation for the passion of our Lord, and for his ultimate resurrection. We need this reminder every year of just what blessings we have as followers of Jesus Christ, the son of the living God.

What a blessing it is to believe in a God that only wants us to be in full loving and merciful relationship with us. What a blessing to constantly reflect and pray about this relationship knowing that the Holy Spirit is a constant presence with us to guide us and comfort us.

May this day be holy for you as you start this season of Lent. May you find space in your life for stillness before God, to allow God to be in communion with you. Take up this holy time each day as a spiritual discipline and reflect on how God is calling you into a deeper and deeper relationship.

May God bless you and may you feel close to God always.