

Ash Wednesday 2018 SML

JL 2:12-18

MT 6:1-6,16-18

Ash Wednesday is a day of shattered expectations, as God echoes the call to repentance as recorded in the prophet Joel:

“Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, weeping and mourning. Rend your hearts and not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God.” (2:12ff)

We come near God for a time, and then wander, as did the Old Testament people:

- ✓ who grumbled against God and against Moses in the wilderness,
- ✓ who worshipped the golden calf,
- ✓ who practiced their temple prostitution,
- ✓ who turned from the Law.

Our reaction is, “Man, they were stupid,” when in fact, we are no better than they were.

Ash Wednesday is a day of unfulfilled dreams, dreams of:

- ✓ a creation like that pictured in Eden,
- ✓ a world of caring, mutual respect and concern;
- ✓ a world where no one would hunger,
- ✓ no one would be left behind and forgotten,

because all would live together in peace. Those values are embraced for a time, but ambition and competition distract, which leads to greed. And like the Old Testament people, I'm wandering in the wilderness, not in the desert between Egypt and the Holy Land, but wandering nonetheless, far from the heart of God.

Ash Wednesday is a day of broken vows. Whenever you talk about broken vows, you think of marriage vows. I think of priestly vows. And we reduce our vows to whether or not you've been faithful to your husband or wife, and me to celibacy. There's other ways to break a marriage vow besides marital infidelity and there are other ways to break priestly vows besides celibacy. At Baptism, promises were made, and at Confirmation promises were renewed, to reject Satan and all his works and all his empty promises. When you break a vow made to another person, you feel it. But baptismal vows are broken every day, and it's barely noticed.

Ash Wednesday is a day to squirm. Ash Wednesday is a day to focus on sin. Receiving ashes is a very popular Catholic practice because ignorant people have the misimpression that receiving ashes shows people that you are holy because you went to Mass, when in fact the reason you receive ashes is

because you sin. Receiving ashes can be likened more to wearing a scarlet “A” than to being holy.

What follows sin? An apology.

No apology, no forgiveness.

Apology. Forgiveness.

It’s that simple. Remember:

- ✓ Jesus did not forgive the sinful woman until she expressed her sorrow.
- ✓ There was no rejoicing in heaven until the lost sheep and lost coin were found.
- ✓ The Father did not forgive his prodigal son until he returned home and apologized.
- ✓ Jesus did not grant Zacchaeus forgiveness until Zacchaeus atoned for his sin.
- ✓ Jesus did not forgive the repentant thief until he had a change of heart.

Sin. Apology. What follows the apology? Retribution.

Expiation. Sacrifice.

Today is also Valentine’s Day. First time since World War II, since 1945 that Valentine’s Day falls on Ash Wednesday.

Besides the fact the chocolate will need to wait til tomorrow, or for those giving up chocolate for Lent, the chocolate will need

to wait until Holy Saturday, there no better day to celebrate Valentine's Day than Ash Wednesday. Valentine's Day is the day we remember all those who we love, and to do something special for those we hold close.

Ash Wednesday is the day, starting the Season of Lent, when we do something special for God, who we hold close. And the way we are wired, there's no better way to show someone you love them, there's no better way to show God you love them, than to sacrifice. We love God because God loved us first. We sacrifice, because God sacrificed first.

Hence the Lenten practices. During this season, you are strongly encouraged:

- ✓ to participate in Mass and receive Holy Communion daily,
- ✓ to go to Confession,
- ✓ to attend the Stations of the Cross and Benediction,
- ✓ to read the Scriptures prayerfully,
- ✓ and to perform acts of self-denial and works of mercy.

Ash Wednesday is a day to squirm. Sin. Apology.

Retribution. Expiation. Sacrifice. None of us should be proud to get ashes. If anything, we should be ashamed.