

(Readings: Joel 2:12-18; Ps. 51; 2 Cor 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)

Today, Ash Wednesday, is the beginning of Lent; gray ashes will be blessed and smudged on our brows; ashes that were once the branches of a living, vibrant, green, tropical palm tree. As we are branded this Lent, the words we will hear tell us that '*we are dust and to dust we shall return.*' That is half of the message of Ash Wednesday. Perhaps it isn't a pleasant thought but the Church thinks it is important to remind her children, once a year at least, of the facts of life: one day all of us will be overthrown by time and be transformed into a handful of gray, powdery ash.

As Saint Paul tells us, today is a very acceptable time, the day of salvation. Today we take the plunge into the beautiful but difficult season of Lent, perhaps after weeks of pondering what we will do for Lent, and after a day of feasting before the fast. Today we follow the encouragement of Joel. Whatever our pursuits may have been up to this point, we are called to proclaim a fast, to gather as an assembly, and to rend our hearts as we turn to God and ask for reconciliation and forgiveness.

The ashes that we will wear on our foreheads after today's liturgy are a sign that we're part of a community that is beginning together a sacred time of repentance – of turning back to God. We continue this sacred, communal time of penance with special days of communal fasting and abstinence called for by the Church. This is an important aspect of Lent, as we, the people of God, turn back to our Father as the people in Joel's day did, changing our ways and asking forgiveness. As we celebrate the Sundays of Lent – and especially as we encourage our brothers and sisters who will be joining the Catholic Church and our parish during the Easter Vigil – we draw nearer to our celebration of Holy Week and the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The other half of the message of Lent is this: *Turn away from sin and believe in the Gospel.*

That's a whole lot harder than just dirtying our foreheads and letting our stomachs growl all day. Jesus calls us to go deeper into our own hearts during Lent, as well as participating in our communal liturgies and practices. Each of us has that one area in our own lives that tends to stand in the way of our coming closer to Jesus and to truly following His Way of the Cross.

What is YOUR secret sin? What is that one attitude, that one resentment, that one habit that keeps you from growing in faith? Jesus invites us to quiet time, time in the wilderness and the desert of our busy lives, to discover from Him what we need to let go of and what we need to practice in order to draw nearer to Him and to radiate His life and love to others.

As we begin the season of Lent, let us go to our rooms – or to our inner hearts – close the door, and spend time alone with God. Let God speak to our hearts about our particular call to draw closer to Him, to turn away from any hindrances in the past, and to follow whatever form of prayer, fasting and almsgiving will draw us closer to God and to the people of God.

Ask yourself: What is my five-year plan? What am I doing well in my life, spiritually and physically? What areas do I most need to improve? And what are my dreams for the person I hope to be one day?

Fr. Romano Guardini, a famous priest, who turned to ash in 1968, wrote in "Richer Fare for the Christian People" this consideration:

*Everything turns to ashes, everything whatever. This house I live in, these clothes I am wearing, my household stuff, my money, my fields, meadows, woods, the dog that follows me, the clock in the hall, the hand I am writing with, these eyes that read what I write, and the rest of my body, people I have loved, people I have hated, or been afraid of, whatever was great in my eyes upon earth, whatever small and contemptible, all without exceptions will fall back into dust.*

Now is an acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation! AMEN!