

Ash Wednesday: reflections on fasting, prayer and almsgiving

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Ps 51:1-18; 2 Cor 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday the start of Lent. Last year's palms become this year's ashes. Ashes in a sense reduce us to what we are, symbolizing human frailty, spiritual brokenness and the need for repentance and healing.

From the 1st to the 3rd century, Lent was all about fasting. Originally, the fast was very strict. Only one meal a day toward evening was allowed. From the 4th to the 9th century, the Church extended the fast to a whole 40 days. From the 9th to the 15th century, there was a gradual relaxation of the rules about fasting from food and drink. A gradual shift to abstaining from evil deeds, increasing good works and focusing on personal spiritual renewal. This trend brought greater emphasis on other forms of penitential activity such as self-control, deeper prayer, works of compassion, service and almsgiving. Lenten practices evolved from "*what am I doing for myself*" to "*what am I doing for my neighbour.*" Now, in the 21st century, fasting has been reduced to perhaps just Fridays or only two days: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Fasting is part of the spirituality of all religions; it implies exercising self-control; prayer implies being God-centred; almsgiving implies being neighbour-centred, expressed in loving service. Self-denial is part of developing both self-control and self-discipline. Human growth and maturity require self-discipline. Competitive athletes know the need for self-discipline and intensive training for both mind and body. In sport, often the person with the greatest capacity for concentration on the goal wins – sports psychology is key. Paul tells us that "*athletes deny themselves all sorts of things. They do this to win a crown of leaves that wither. But we, a crown that is imperishable.*" (1 Cor. 9-25)

Lent calls us to be neighbour-centred, cultivating the virtues of kindness and compassion; avoiding harsh and unkind judgments; Being sensitive to the needs of others, forgiving, open-minded and accepting difference.

Fasting – Isaiah reminds us also includes freeing others from their burdens, sharing what we have with others, caring for the oppressed, and not turning ours back on those who need us. When we live in this way: "*Our light shall break forth like the dawn, and our wounds shall quickly be healed.*" (Is. 58:8)

Prayer – as Jesus demonstrated, has great power; it brings God's grace which empowers us to resist evil and do good. Perhaps taking a few minutes of quiet time each day during Lent to get in touch with the Spirit of God present at the core of our being is a helpful discipline. Psalm 46 reminds us: "*Be still, and know that I am God.*"

Almsgiving - has special spiritual value, because it expresses that love of neighbour through compassion and self-giving service. We meet God in our neighbour. Pope Leo the Great said "*Prayer has the greatest efficacy to obtain favours from God when it is supported by works of mercy, such as almsgiving.*" By helping someone else, we really help ourselves. We can give of: our time, our talents or our possessions. Through our generosity and kindness to others, through our prayer and self-denial, we reflect the hope and joy of the Easter message "*that we are saved through God's love expressed in Jesus Christ*".

Lent calls us to be God-centred. Jesus on the cross is a sign not only of forgiveness of sin, but of atonement for sin. Christ teaches us the value of prayer and fasting in order to gain self-control and self-discipline. We could do a lot worse than let the words of the prophet Joel guide our spiritual journeys during Lent: "*Return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning for your sins. Rend your hearts, and not your garments, says the Lord God Almighty.*" (Joel 2. 12:2) The prophet Micah sums up what God requires of us: "*The Lord has told us what is good and what He requires, namely, to do what is just; to love tenderly; and to walk humbly with your God.*" (Mic. 6:8)