

THE LENTEN WORD

A seed to sow for every day

Ash Wednesday

No Gloom!

Joel 2:12-18; 2Cor 5:20 - 6:2; Mt 6:1-6, 16-18

No-one receiving the ashes today will fail to feel the sombre quality of their message. We are dust that has been raised up by God; at his word we will return to dust. There is no choice in the matter. No hope that does not *know* that, is worth trusting. No self-image which forgets that will be true. No life lived in evasion of that can be happy. It is a truth which we *need* to know, and which is never out of place.

Nevertheless, even in this Lenten time the Lord warns us that our aspect is not to be gloomy. It is in search of life and joy that we set off on the Lenten path. If we turn away from the things to which the world turns for consolation, it is because we have heard the voice of God, and we know that our shortest way to joy is the shortest way we can find to God.

Although there is austerity and - because we are so dependent on our earthly consolations - some bleakness about Lent, we must make sure that we never feel *alone*. We fast, pray, and give *as a Church*: and there must be in our Lenten masses an especial sense of support for each other.

Above all, we know that we are waiting with Jesus, who fasted in the desert for forty days. The gifts we seek there are his gifts, of which he said: "*Your Father, who sees all that is done in secret, will reward you.*"

**Indeed, you love truth in the heart:
then in the secret of my heart, teach me wisdom.
O purify me, then I shall be clean;
O wash me: I shall be whiter than snow.**

Thursday

Choose: Life, or Death!

Dt 30:15-20; Lk 9:22-25

The ashes are washed off, and today the Word introduces into our mind the real boundaries of our freedom. We cannot choose but to be dust, because that is what God has chosen us to be. But we have before us a real choice, and here God has made us able to choose freely: shall we base our decisions on death, or on life?

The forces of death are in us all. We know fear and pain, sickness and weakness, despair - these are among the heralds and champions of death in us. They offer us a way of living, bearing bitter fruit in sadness, selfishness, loneliness, self-pity, meanness, mistrust, and hatred. Left to itself, the force of death can do all that, and can make us, almost without our knowledge, its apostles.

The forces of life are also in us. We know truthfulness, impulsive generosity, sympathy, courage, and the care for justice; we also know love, that lifts us away from the works of death, and into the realm of light, where forgiveness, sacrifice, and communion - God's gifts - can grow. When we want to make this tremendous choice, we shall be ready to hear the words of Jesus today:

**If anyone wants to be a follower of mine,
let him take up his cross every day and follow me.
Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it;
whover loses his life for my sake will save it.**

Friday

The Fast That Pleases God

Is 58:1-9; Mt 9:14-15

We are presented immediately by the phrase above with the idea of a fast that is *unpleasing* to God. *We can do Lent the wrong way* - and still fast. What a travesty - what wasted effort! Lent is not a time for us to please ourselves, but a time when we should live as God wants, in order to please him. And how does a loving father want to see his children live?

That question should remind us that the basic message of our faith is always properly called *good news*. Religion that brings nothing but grief is almost certainly wrong religion. God asks for great sacrifices sometimes, and our lives are to be laid down; but they are to be given lovingly, and that means a joyous sacrifice, a willing, chosen gift of ourselves. When Jesus was with his disciples there was a fulness of joy in the air that made people think of the reign of the promised Messiah as a close, realistic possibility. It was in the light and glory of that experience that they found the power to follow, to learn, and to give themselves.

Perhaps there are things which we look to other than the love of Christ, seeking in them the inspiration to live well: ambition, self-interest, greed, power, possessions. Fasting from these false foods is opening ourselves to the Lenten food which sustained Jesus:

**My food is to do the will of the one who sent me,
and to complete his work.**

**Man does not live on bread alone,
but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.**

Saturday

Not To Call The Virtuous

Is 58:9-14, Lk 5:27-32

It must come as a shock to hear that Jesus did not come to call together the virtuous, but to gather sinners. Our Mass always begins with an acknowledgment that we are glad to remember this fact about him, and that should be the first thought we have in response to today's Gospel: *It is my sins that qualify me to belong to Jesus today: he has come to call me to holiness today.*

Secondly, we should notice the rôle Jesus chooses for himself: that of the healer. *It is not those who are well that need the doctor, but the sick.* To think of our sins as a form of suffering, preventing us from the fulness of life, is always instructive. We are still half in love with our sins - otherwise they would not tempt us any more. We mistake the false happiness that is in the gift of sin for fulfilment, for life, and we cannot see our way to life except there. This is a form of sickness, like that of an addict.

In Lent we are taken by the hand, and led away from our past. This opens our hearts and minds to the possibility of purification. One of the phrases of the Old Testament speaks of Israel being *cleansed of all her idols*. Perhaps we could learn to fast from selfish responses, which preserve in us the sins of our past, and believe in a new self, created after the pattern of the risen Christ, in which there will be no room for the darkness of shame.

Leaving everything, he got up and followed Jesus.