

## Homily for Ash Wednesday 2022



There is an urgency in the Ash Wednesday readings and an urgency in the readings we have throughout the entire 40 days of Lent. They seem to be saying, “Act now and don’t put off till tomorrow what needs to be done today!” That urgency is connected to Jesus’ own journey to Jerusalem. It is crunch time for Jesus. With each Sunday’s readings, you will notice he is getting closer and closer to Jerusalem, and things are getting darker and darker. Each Sunday the plot to kill Jesus thickens. The resistance to his love is

like a noose that gets tighter and tighter around his neck. Finally, he arrives in Jerusalem on a donkey and enters into his Passion, a passion that overcame and continues to overcome death itself. If we knew the clock was ticking, and that we had only 40 days to live, there would be an urgency in us, as well, to do the things that were of utmost importance. Let’s not wait, for as Paul says in that second reading: ***“Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation.”***

Similarly, the clock was ticking for the Prophet Joel and the Jewish people as we heard in that first reading. Every year we kick off Lent with this opening line from the Prophet Joel: ***“Even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart...”*** Why “even now”? What’s so special about “now”? Once again, a little context can help us. It is the year 586 B.C., and it is do-or-die time for our Jewish ancestors in faith. It is the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, the last hour before a tragedy is about to unfold. Given how late it is in the game, will there be time to avoid the tragedy? The impending tragedy is that the Babylonian troops are in formation on the border of Judah and are about to invade and conquer.

Sound familiar? You think these scripture readings aren’t saying something about our own world here and now? To make things worse, Judah is in the middle of a crop devastation. Swarms of locusts have devoured the crops and people have nothing to eat. The Prophet Joel and the Jewish people are looking starvation and imminent invasion in the face. Perhaps they should go to the Temple and present to God a grain offering in the hopes that God would be pleased with the grain offering and protect them from starvation and the invading Babylonians. Not a bad plan except for the fact that there is no grain to offer God; the locusts got it all. What else could go wrong?

The Lord knows the predicament of Joel and the rest of the Jews. God says to Joel, “Your grain offerings--that is when you had grain to offer me--was flattering, but it was always you I wanted, Joel. Bring me, Joel, the best offering you can, the offering of yourself; forget the grain, it’s you I’ve always and only wanted from the very beginning. And tell the priests, Joel, to leave their

altars, because I want them too. And tell the bridegroom to leave his room, because I want him, as well. And tell the bride to leave her canopy, because I want her, too. And the children, even the youngest infants at the breast, tell them I want them too.”

He wants us all, and he will not stop until he has us all home. In today’s world we would diagnose Jesus with obsessive compulsive disorder and suggest a good therapist and a bottle of pills.

Like I said, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He is on a mission to bring the love of God to all peoples of the world, and nothing will stop him. We must learn that crosses and tombs are no match for his love. He is the Good Shepherd who will not rest until every last sheep is brought home safely. He is the father in the famous Prodigal Son story who will not rest until both his sons are home and safe with him. He is the woman who sweeps the house clean and can’t stop until she has found the lost coin. With this Jesus, there are no throw aways, and there is no such thing as cutting his losses and moving on.

When we dare to love as he has loved us, we begin to realize our true vocation. Being a priest, being married, being a person called to religious life, or remaining single is fine, but it’s not our fundamental vocation. Our fundamental vocation—our deepest and truest calling—is to bear witness to God’s love in the world, just as Jesus did. When we are faithful to our calling as witnesses to God’s love in the world, nobody will be able to say, **“Where is their God?”** Instead, after these 40 days of Lent, hopefully we will become, more and more, **ambassadors for Christ** as St. Paul says. Our very lives will become the books, the living testaments from which people will be able to read the gospel in us.

By receiving the ashes today, you are saying, “I’m in! Point me in the direction of Jerusalem. I may not have much to offer God, but underneath my prayer, fasting and almsgiving, it was me He always wanted in the first place.”

**Fr. Phil**