

Homily – February 14th, 2024 – Ash Wednesday



Almost all the Scripture readings we hear at liturgy, we hear only once every three years. One of the exceptions to this pattern is the Ash Wednesday readings; we get them every year. From it, we hear that Jesus is all for prayer, fasting, and almsgiving and thinks we should be,

too. However, he warns against parading these classic Lenten disciplines before others. Perhaps he saw too much of this in the Pharisees of his time and how far their hearts were from love of God and love of neighbour. He saw too much hypocrisy and does want us to go down that road ourselves. Contrastingly, he loved and praised genuine, authentic people, people of integrity, even if their past sins were known to everyone. He was the Truth itself and praised honesty wherever he found it.

In the spiritual life, Jesus is not so much concerned about actions *per se*. But, he is very much concerned about the place within us from where these actions emerge. The old word for that was “motive.” From what motive are you doing what you are doing? Is it helping to build a better world? Or, is it just self-serving?

Growing up as a child and teenager, it was non-negotiable that for Lent we gave up any and all snacks between meals as well as television for the entire 40 days. Then one day, my oldest brother, Sean, confronted my mother about how the priest, visiting the school told them that Sundays didn’t count. I cringe to this day when people ask me whether something counts or not. It tells me the archetype of the Pharisee is still alive and well to this day. Getting back to my mother, she reluctantly allow us to “break our Lent,” as we called it, on Sundays as the parish priest had already undermined her authority by telling the whole congregation that each Sunday was “little Easter,” a time of celebration, not fasting. We were off the hook on Sundays!

So, being the little Pharisees that we were, we would not watch Hockey Night in Canada on Saturday night but, instead, would play cards with my father, Euchre being the game of choice. However, at the stroke of midnight, when Saturday night turned into Sunday morning—little Easter—the T.V. came on and the junk food came out. My mother, who would not partake in the card games, shook her head at the fact that we had missed the whole point of Lent. We focused on the letter of the Law and totally missed the spirit of the Law. We had all become master Euchre players and Pharisees all in the one fell swoop. We didn't rend (tear open) our hearts. We tore open bags of Doritos.

As kids, Lent seemed to last forever, almost like a prison sentence. Our questions as children were, "When is this going to end? When can we go back to our old way of life, a life of T.V. and junk food?" I really was that shallow at one point in my life, not the spiritual giant you've all come to know and depend on.

Here's a quote from one of my favorite spiritual writers, the late Brennan Manning. He writes: ***"The noonday devil of the Christian life is the temptation to lose the inner self while preserving the shell of edifying behavior. Suddenly, I discover that I am ministering to AIDS victims to enhance my résumé. I find I renounce ice cream for Lent to lose the five excess pounds. I drop hints about the absolute priority of meditation and contemplation to create the impression that I am a man of prayer. At some remembered moment I have lost the connection between internal purity and external works of piety. In the most humiliating sense of the word, I have become a legalist. I have fallen victim to what T.S. Eliot calls the greatest sin of all: to do the right thing for all the wrong reasons."***

When you can say, "Phew, I'm glad that is over" like I did as a kid, you know you've done the right thing but for all the wrong reasons. Ashes will not save us, only hearts given over to God.

So, why bother with ashes at all if that's the case? Ashes—as one five-year-old kindergarten boy once told me, "Are deader than dead,"--are a sign of our willingness to enter death. Ashes are our way of saying, "I'm all in. I'm willing to

die to who I think I am and allow God to raise me up in the likeness of his Son, Jesus.” That has to be more than just words.

Lent starts with the symbol of death—ashes--and ends with the symbol of Easter—new life. The point is to get to the resurrection, to become a new person, a new community of faith, and not simply to return to our old selves and say, “Phew, I’m glad that’s over for another year.”

If you read the gospels, you’ll notice that Jesus, on three separate occasions, raised someone from the dead. He walks through a town called Nain in the middle of a funeral procession. A grieving widow is about to bury her only son. Jesus touches the casket and say, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” The dead man sat up and began to speak. In a second story, the daughter of Jairus—the president of the synagogue—died. Jesus spoke to the girl and she, too, woke up from the dead. And the third story involves Jesus calling forth Lazarus to life after he had been dead in the tomb for four days.

These are resuscitation stories, not resurrection stories. What’s the difference? When you are resuscitated, you really were dead, and you really are brought back to life. However, you are brought back to your old way of life, your physical life, the life that is limited; you’re given some more earthly time. However, Jesus himself is not resuscitated but resurrected. In the resurrected life, you are not limited by time or space. You are not restored to your old, earthly existence. You are given a resurrected body, one that cannot age, decay or die. Resurrected life is eternal life, not just more of the same old life. Jesus resuscitated three people, but he, himself, was resurrected. Why do I mention this?

The goal of Lent is to move from ashes to resurrected life. Lent isn’t about returning to our old selves, business as usual, without any permanent transformation. Otherwise, we’re just breaking out the junk food and saying, “Phew, I’m glad that’s over so I can get back to my old way of life.”

Pray, fast, and give alms not as a way of flexing your spiritual muscles for 40 days, otherwise the imperial ego will still be in charge throughout the entire season of Lent. Nothing good will have changed for you or for the world at large. Pray, fast, and give alms so that God can create a new heart in you. When we renew our baptismal promises at the Easter Vigil, 40 days from now, we won't be going back to our old selves; it won't be business as usual. With courage and God's grace, we will be made into a new creation, a resurrected people. The ashes will have served their purpose and will give way to flowing water.

~Fr. Phil