

2/17/21

Ash Wednesday

Lent—the Church calls us to heartfelt repentance

Joel 2: 12-14

“Now therefore,” says the Lord, “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.

So rend your heart, and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm.

Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him—a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God?”

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every Sunday, we confess in our Creed our faith that the incarnate Son of God “suffered for us under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.” Today on this Ash Wednesday, we begin our observance of the Season of Lent, a time when the Christian Church calls her people to review the Gospel accounts which are summarized in those phrases, so that the words are refreshed for us and filled again with the vivid pictures which the evangelists supply of that suffering, that crucifixion, that death, and that laying of our Savior in the tomb.

And all the while, we want those pictures and graphic images to be accompanied by the beautiful commentary supplied to us by the prophet Isaiah, “He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.” He—Christ Jesus—for us—dying sinners that we are. The suffering and the death we see in Him is the measure of our sin and our fallenness, to be sure. But even more, it is the truest picture of His immeasurable love and His active caring for you and for me—that saving love which moved Him to endure so much in order to redeem us from sin and Satan and death. To be renewed through His word in our penitent faith which receives His forgiveness and the life which He offers; to be renewed in our determination to walk in the footsteps of our incarnate Savior and to show His kind of love for those around us; to be renewed in our worship as the words and phrases which we hear so often come alive for us once more—that is what the Church intends for us in the Lenten Season which we enter today.

I

“Turn to Me with all your heart,” says the Lord to us through His

prophet Joel, “rend your heart, and not your garments.” To tear one’s clothes was for the people of Judea and Galilee a sign of the most intense passion. It could indicate the most sincere and heartfelt repentance, and it could also be done purely for show—as a dramatic but empty sign of a penitence which sadly was not at all heartfelt. “(R)end your heart,” the Lord says. He seeks more in us than empty gestures.

Fasting, putting ashes on one’s forehead, denying oneself during the weeks of Lent something which one normally enjoys—Christ’s people make use of all these practices and more as signs of their repentance. In and of themselves, these can be helpful reminders to us of the penitent faith to which we are summoned—wholesome disciplines for our minds and hearts. Just as Luther says in his Small Catechism about fasting and physical preparations as ways of getting ready to receive the Lord’s Supper, such practices can point to and remind us of the inner change we need and want to undergo. “Rend your heart,” the Lord says, lest we let such disciplines become empty or even self-aggrandizing actions in which we subtly take pride, as Jesus warns us in the appointed Gospel for today.

To rend our hearts in true repentance will mean that we recognize our sin as the evil which it truly is. The death of the soul into which we have been born, the lovelessness and the utter selfishness in the sins we commit in thought and word and deed—also in those times for which we find excuses—the Season of Lent is a time for us to weigh the evil of our sin in the scales of the suffering and the death of our Savior. So that we may truly rend our hearts in repentance, the Church bids us follow Him to Gethsemane, to stand with Him at the mock trials in which He is slandered and falsely condemned, and finally to sit at the foot of the cross on the hill Golgotha, all the while taking to heart Isaiah’s commentary, “It is our iniquity which the Lord has laid on Him.”

II

And to us as we rend our hearts in repentance and recognize our sin and our sinfulness, the prophet Joel also announces the pure Gospel of the Lenten Season. “Return to the Lord your God,” he says to Israel and to us, “for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm.”

The Lord calls us to rend our hearts in repentance in order to prepare us to receive that grace—that relenting of His anger, that saving kindness—which Mary’s Son has won for us in His Passion and in His death. The sufferings which we observe in Him, the pain and the shame and the death we see in Him—these do more than show us the nature of our sin. They also proclaim to us His infinite, redeeming love. “Return to the Lord your God,”

He says to us. Our Lord calls us to repentance in order to call us to faith in His Anointed One—faith in that grace and that mercy which He offers to us.

“Turn to (the Lord) with all your heart,” the prophet urges us, “Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him.” We must be clear that Joel is here in no way expressing doubt concerning our Redeemer/God’s offer of forgiveness and life. He simply uses a figure of speech—a picturesque Hebrew way of expressing absolute certainty. “The Lord will indeed bless you and accept you as His children through your trust in His incarnate Son,” the prophet tells us. The grace and the mercy which the Lord offers, the forgiveness and life with which He earnestly wants to bless us—these are absolutely sure and certain, because they are purchased for us with the blood of Mary’s Son who is God’s Son. The Church does not call us to view the sufferings and death of Jesus of Nazareth as some kind of macabre exercise in watching someone else’s pain. She calls us to remember—at every step of our Lenten walk—who it is who bears all this suffering in our stead. It is Immanuel—“God with us.” It is the Incarnate Son of the Most High. That is why St. John can write, “the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”

“Turn to (the Lord) with all your heart,” the prophet says. We do that by grasping in Spirit-given faith His grace and His kindness and the offer of blood-bought forgiveness and life which Christ Jesus has won for us.

III

“Turn to Me with all your heart,” the Lord says to us through His prophet, “So rend your heart, and not your garments.” The true repentance and faith in which we want to grow during this Lenten Season are to remain with us all year long. The words of the prophet call us to live our baptisms—to embody the life in Christ which was given us in that “washing with water and the Word.”

In baptism, St. Paul tells us, we were united to Christ Jesus in His Passion—His sufferings and death were made ours. In baptism we were buried with Christ to our sin and raised again to walk with Him in the new life which was poured upon us there at the baptismal font—to “walk in newness of life,” as St. Paul says. To “rend our hearts and not just our garments” and to “turn to the Lord with all (our) hearts” as the prophet calls us to do will therefore include also this, that—in repentance and in faith and in earnest prayer for the help of His Holy Spirit—we seek to embody here and now His triumph over sin and death and Satan, His life of divine compassion and kindness, His heavenly life of actively caring for others.

The Season of Lent is, then, also a time for us to consider new ways in which we can figure forth the love we receive from Him—serve Him more

faithfully, give more abundantly as we can for the work of His kingdom, show His love more clearly to others in what we say and do, comfort more tenderly those who are grieving, pray more regularly for those who are suffering. “Now therefore,” says the Lord, “Turn to Me with all your heart...rend your hearts and not your garments.” Through His prophet, our Savior thus calls us to make use of this Lenten Season also as a time for us to find new ways to follow in His footsteps.

May the Holy Spirit grant this to each of us for Jesus’ sake. Amen.