

ASH WEDNESDAY MARCH 9, 2011 CYCLE "A"

THEME: HOW DO I DESCRIBE MY FAST ?

**READINGS: JOEL 2:1-2, 12-17, ISA. 58:1-12,
2 COR. 5:20B-6:10, MATTHEW 6:1-12,16-21**

When I grew up, the Season of Lent was strictly observed in our Catholic home. We fasted, ate fish every Friday and on Ash Wednesday. No excuse except near hospitalization or death, it seemed, relieved you from attending church every Sunday and all the Fridays during Lent. We fasted from everything except plain water for taking prescribed medications, from midnight on Saturday in order to be able to receive communion on Sunday. "Barney, when you brush your teeth," my mother would caution, "remember not to swallow any of the toothpaste or water or you will break your fast." Penances were just imposed, no questions asked. "I think you should give up candy and deserts for Lent," was the usual penance I was given. I didn't realize what a benefit Lent offered my mom, she had 7 kids! She must have loved Lent! I know we really missed her deserts. For me, Lent seemed to last forever.

Penances, fasting, alms-giving and prayer are very ancient and venerable practices. They cleanse us, shape us, sanctify us, and serve to praise and glorify almighty God, as long as they are performed in the right spirit and with the right intentions. These practices of repentance and purification go back to our ancient ancestors the Israelites and have been encouraged by the prophets and our Lord when they are accepted with the right attitude and in a righteous spirit. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me," says Psalm 51:10. The right intentions, the right focus, the right direction. And look again at what Joel says today, "Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." Joel 2:12-13.

In Isaiah today we see what he means by true fasting. "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread

with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?...If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.” Isa.58:67, 10.

Jesus himself mentions all three of these beautiful penitential practices in our Gospel pericope today. “So whenever you **give alms** do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. So that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you...But when **you pray** go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you...And **whenever you fast**, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Matt.6:16-18. Hasn't Jesus given us the right motivation, the right focus, the right direction? And if we look at our reading from Paul today we see tremendous encouragement and the very highest motivation to live out the commands of Jesus, for he says, “We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2Cor.5:20b.

If we keep our ultimate focus during Lent on the cross of Jesus and the glory of his resurrection, we will achieve the reward which is summed up for us by Jesus' own words in Matthew chapter 25. Our Lord looks back to the great passage we heard today from Isaiah and puts the words of the great prophet into his own words as he says, “When the Son of man comes in his glory to sit on his throne...he will separate the sheep from the goats...he will say to the just, ‘come blessed of my Father and take possession of the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world...For I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave drink, naked and you clothed me, sick and in prison and you came to visit me...And the just will say Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink, naked and clothe you, sick or in prison and come to visit you?’ And the Lord will answer, truly I tell you,

whenever you did it for one of these the least of my brothers or sisters, you did it for me.” Matt.25:31ff.

So then how do we describe **our** fast? How do we describe **our** Lent? How do we describe **our** journey to the cross and resurrection? Marked with the penitential ashes of Lent in the sign of the cross on our foreheads tonight, let us go forth and reach out in love to our brothers and sisters as Jesus commands, making this Lenten Season truly blessed. **Amen.**

Pastor Barney