

Ash Wednesday 2019 “A Reminder of Death and an Invitation to Life”

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From a liturgical perspective, this is a strange day in the life of the Church. We have our solemnities, our feast days and memorials. Most of what happens liturgically are meant to be rightly understood as celebrations. And then we have days like today when we fast, come to church, have ashes placed on our foreheads, and we are reminded that we are dust and to dust we will return. I believe there is something right about this, something healthy about it in my view. As I was praying about today, I got thinking about how our culture seems to be in denial of this. I am entertained by every other health study on the news that says if you eat this or drink that you will increase your chances of death by however many percentage points...as if death can actually be avoided. Now, don't get me wrong, living a healthy lifestyle is all well and good, however the liturgy today gives us a different kind of “newsflash”, as in breathing increases your chances of death. Death is consequence of life. We all know this. And we might be tempted to dismiss the whole ashes and death thing today as being morbid, however, I see the focus of today as being more of an inoculation. Yes, the experience of death is a consequence of being alive. However, the reverse is true as well. The reminder of our mortality invites us to live our lives more fully and to reject sin so to be fully alive. You see, the reminder “you are dust and to dust you will return”, invites us to not squander the precious time we have been given on this earth to live, to truly live in a manner that pleases God and leads us to salvation.

Theologically speaking, everything that happens in our faith journey, including all of the Church's liturgies, are meant to be interpreted through the lens of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. Today is no different. By remembering we are mortal and that we are sinners, we recognize emphatically our need for salvation. Our first reading from the prophet Joel implores us, “Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness”. Our second reading from St. Paul reminds us, “Brothers and sisters: We are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him. Working together, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” And Jesus in our Gospel reading challenges us that we make our religious observances actually real and authentic, as in really helping us to grow closer to God rather than a mere show or social custom. You see, the hypocrites Jesus is referring to were street performers who wore masks pretending to be others that they weren't...as actors do. When Jesus levels the charge of hypocrisy to the religious leaders of his time what he is saying is, our religious observances are not meant to be “make believe” or “pretend” or “for show”. Our religious observances are only meaningful if we put our hearts into it and truly want a closer relationship with God our Father. This is why Jesus says, “When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you.”

We can also see in this Gospel reading the three areas of focus for the season of Lent as we embrace our mortality and seek to grow closer to Jesus, who alone can save us from the power of sin and death. The three areas of focus during Lent are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. We pray more during Lent so to grow closer to God, our creator and our Lord. We fast during Lent so to remind ourselves there is more to life than mere comforts. We give charitably for the benefit of the poor so to remind ourselves that we are in this this thing together, and we cannot authentically love God unless we also love our neighbor. And although the Church offers her minimal expectations, the right Lenten practice is the one you and God settle on in your heart.

Yes, the Church has her solemnities, memorials and feasts and the liturgy today seems to stand in stark contrast as does the season of Lent for that matter in comparison to the other liturgical seasons. However, I find it somewhat therapeutic that the liturgy today doesn't discriminate. It doesn't matter if you are rich or poor. It doesn't matter if you are young or old. We are all dust and to dust we will return. We are all sinners and we all need salvation. We are all mortal and our time is limited. And so, with this knowledge, we choose to live. We choose to live fully by the measure we love God and love our neighbor. We choose to live fully by rejecting sin and by following the Gospel. We choose to live fully in this world and the next by following Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life.