

Ash Wednesday

a sermon preached on

Ash Wednesday

17 February 2010

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr Jim McKenna

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Lecture: Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17; Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

Lent is “the” season of the church’s year - when we are asked to respond the call of repentance. It is the time for preparation for the sacrament of Baptism – a time of renewal and rebirth for the whole church.

At the very beginning on Ash Wednesday, - ashes, (which are made from the previous year’s palm crosses and mixed with the holy oil of Chrism) are imposed upon the forehead with the sign of the cross, accompanied with the words: “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return; repent and believe the Gospel.”

This symbolic action reminds us of our mortality and humanity, and our need for repentance. This action sets the tone for the remainder of Lent, and many of the prayers, meditations, and the vestments and liturgical colour purple which adorns the church, serves to remind us of the need of God’s grace.

Many of the prayers of this season see Lenten penance as the forerunner of Easter joy with its climax in the victory of the resurrection.

We rid ourselves of the darkness of sin to make way for the light of the risen Christ.

In the first reading we heard how Joel called the people of Judea to repentance with a poetic sermon, at a time of a plague of locusts in Palestine, which destroyed the harvests. This may have taken place a very long time ago, yet we can still identify with those threatened people, and with their response, as Joel calls every member of the community to repent and turn back wholeheartedly to God. The reading ends with God’s promise of blessing to those who repent – who answer the call.

In this Lenten period we are called to repent, and many Christians feel that they should deny themselves some luxury or favourite food or some pastime they enjoy. Something like making a new year resolution, and like the Pharisees they tell all their friends what they are doing. At the most it is a big joke and serves no spiritual purpose.

The first thing we do when we undertake penance is acknowledging that we are sinners. The second thing we do is express the desire to change our lives.

The whole object of penance is to reform. Penance is an exercise in saying no to ourselves. It is intended to show that we are capable of better things – that we want to reform our lives, but we know that we can’t do so without the grace of God. Its purpose is to acquaint ourselves with our better side. It means taking a step in the right direction.

Lent provides us with an opportunity to examine ourselves to see how we may become better disciples of Christ.

Amen.

References: Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21
Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17

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