

Homily of Ash Wednesday, Year A, 2026

Joel 2:12-18; Psalm 51:3-6, 12-14, 17; 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Ash Wednesday is the first day of the Lenten season, which is 46 days before Easter. However, Lent is 40 days since six Sundays in the Lenten season are not counted as fast days. Each Sunday is a feast day, a mini remembrance of Jesus' resurrection.

The word "Lent" comes from an Old English word "Lencten," referring to the lengthening of daylight during the spring season. After days of short daylight and long nights of the winter season, the spring season brings days of long daylight and short nights.

The 40 days of Lent represent the 40 years the Israelites' journey to the Promised Land, the 40 days Moses spent on Mount Sinai to receive the Commandments, and the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert before his ministry. On our part, our journey, our Mount Sinai, and our desert are REPENTANCE, PRAYER, FASTING, and ALMSGIVING.

REPENTANCE: The first reading invites 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. ... Gather the people, notify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and the infants ... Let the bridegroom quit his room and the bride her chamber. ... Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep, and say, 'Spare, O Lord, your people ...'" (Joel 2:12-18).

The Psalm of our Mass, Psalm 51, is the prayer of repentance of King David after coveting Uriah's wife and killing Uriah. God forgave him, and later, God brought out a blessing from David's sin. David's son, Solomon, whose mother was Bathsheba, the wife of the murdered man, succeeded David as the king of Israel. St. Teresa of Avila says, "God writes straight with crooked lines." The story of David's repentance and God's forgiveness should be an encouraging story for anyone reeling in pains of the guilt of past sins or past mistakes or past choices.

St. Paul appeals to us in the second reading, "We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20). This reminds us of last Sunday's gospel reading, "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). During this Lenten season, we are invited to the Sacrament of reconciliation and interpersonal reconciliation.

THE ASH RITUAL: The ash ritual is why the day is called Ash Wednesday. Ash as a sign of contrition, repentance, and mourning goes back to the Old Testament. Job prayed, "I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). The king of Nineveh left his throne, "laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes" (Jonah 3:5-6). In some ancient African traditions, sitting on ash by widows was a part of mourning ritual.

The priest or his assistant marks ash on us and says, "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel," reminding us of Jesus' first words when he began his ministry: "This is a time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15). Or, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19), reminding us of a reality which we often forget.

PRAYER: Lenten season is a time to revive our prayer life, by participating in parish's Lenten spiritual activities like retreats, recollections, and services; and renewal of personal prayer life. "... his disciples asked him in private, 'Why could we not drive [the demon] out?' He said to them, 'This kind can only come out through prayer'" (Mark 9:29).

FASTING: We abstain from meat and food that contains meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday as an act of penance (self-denial) and reverence to Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross. Lenten fasting is an act of penance (self-denial) and sacrifice. Fasting is not only from food and depriving ourselves of necessities, but it also includes, as Pope Francis advises, from sins and attitudes. The Pope says,

- Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
- Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
- Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
- Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
- Fast from worries and have trust in God.
- Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
- Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
- Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.
- Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.
- Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
- Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

ALMSGIVING: Lenten observance must include works of charity especially sharing what we have with the needy. "Prayer with fasting is good. Almsgiving with righteousness is better than wealth with wickedness. It is better to give alms than to store up gold, for almsgiving saves from death, and purges all sin" (Tobit 12:8-10).

We read in the Divine Office of Tuesday, Third Week of Lent, "There are three things, my brethren, by which faith stands firm, devotion remains constant, and virtue endures. They are prayer, fasting and mercy. Prayer knocks at the door, fasting obtains, mercy receives. Prayer, mercy and fasting: these three are one, and they give life to each other."

We pray for a Spirit-filled and a fruitful Lenten season. Amen.

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