

It's Time for a Fearless Moral Inventory

Ash Wednesday. February 17, 2010. (Text: Matthew 6: 6:1-6,16-21)

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." You'll hear these words as the cross of ashes is marked on your forehead today. They're meant to remind us of our mortality, of the words the priest says at the grave: *"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."*

No matter how rich we are, or how poor; no matter how important, or how insignificant; no matter whether we are wise or foolish —nothing can alter our common mortal end. We will all face death, sooner or later. Right now we are living the earthly life God our Father has given us, a life given so that we might receive his love and draw near to him.

Lent is a season of preparation and hope, not a time for gloom and despair. It begins with today's reminder of the grave, but it will end on Easter Eve with the glad shout *"Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!"* and the gospel affirmation that *"because he lives, we too shall live."*

Ash Wednesday reminds us that were it not for Christ, the return of our mortal flesh to the dust would be "the End." The Finish. Death would have the last word. Without the hope of resurrection, there would be no reason to examine our lives, repent and ask forgiveness for our sins, and strive to imitate Christ. There would be no point in the exercise.

But Jesus has delivered us from the power of death. He has saved us from a meaningless existence. And he has invited us to live right now – in this mortal life – according to the standards of the Age to Come, that is, to live in a way that demonstrates our conviction that God's Kingdom has already come among us.

We keep this season of Lent every year. We do this over and over because none of us is perfect. We are frail, weak creatures of flesh, always subject to temptation. Although we may truly be sorry for our sins today and earnestly seek God's forgiveness and the grace to change our lives, the likelihood that we will need to do it again next year is very close to 100%. My own prayer is that between today and the beginning of Lent next year I will have made *some* moral progress, *some* changes that will stick! But I know that – come next Ash Wednesday – I will embrace Lent once more as an opportunity to grow some more, to confess my sins yet again, and to embrace for the five hundredth or maybe the thousandth time God's unfailing love and mercy.

Ash Wednesday is the day to take a good look at ourselves and decide whether we professing Christians are living by the standards of the gospel to which we have repeatedly committed ourselves, or not. It's a day for what Alcoholics Anonymous calls a "fearless moral inventory" —a time to look in the mirror of spiritual and moral objectivity and be honest with ourselves ...and with God. We need to look at our lives and make note of *what needs changing*. So, how do we go about this? Where do we begin? We need a plan, and I'm going to propose one.

First, let me say that it's vital to be balanced, objective, honest, and as fair as possible in our self-examination. Neither excusing our sin nor beating ourselves up is o.k. You and I are unlikely to be either the best of people or the worst. Most of us fall somewhere in the middle. But all of us are people who *"have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and ... have done those things which we ought not to have done."*

The gospel that the Church gives us to contemplate today offers us some guidelines on how to examine our lives. Here, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus discusses the three traditional acts of righteousness that were prescribed by Jewish law: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. These offer three categories we can use for organizing our personal moral inventory.

The first category is *almsgiving* – or we might label it “charity.” This demands that we think about our relationships with other people, particularly those less fortunate than ourselves. Ask yourself, as I ask myself: Am I a generous giver? Do I have compassion for the poor, or do I fault them for being lazy and shiftless? Do I give happily to help others, or do I give regretfully and out of guilt, dreaming about *what I could have done* with that money? Am I naturally sensitive to others’ needs, or must I have someone to remind me? Do I count my personal resources – both money and talent – as entrusted to me by God to be used for God’s purposes in the world? When I start to buy something expensive for myself or my family, do I ever pray first and ask, “Jesus, is there something else you would rather I did with this money?”

The second category is *prayer*. Thinking about prayer calls for us to examine our *relationship with God*. Ask yourself, as I ask myself: How much do I truly desire to be close to God? Is my relationship with God all it could be? Do I know how to pray in any way other than by using the formal prayers of the Book of Common Prayer? Do I pray every day, or just on Sundays? ...or just when I need help? When I pray, do I remember to say “thank you” to God as well as “help me, help me, help me”? Do I spend time listening to God, or do I do all the talking? If someone asked me to describe a moment in the last week when I felt really close to God, would I be able to do that, or would I have a hard time with the question?

The third category is *fasting*. That category is not just about food. It should lead us to think about how we deal with our *personal desires and appetites*. Ask yourself, as I ask myself: Am I self-indulgent, or am I self-disciplined? Am I able to deny myself anything unless I’m on a diet or under doctor’s orders? When was the last time I simply told myself “No” when there was something I craved —something that wasn’t “bad” and wouldn’t “hurt me,” but that I just didn’t need? What am I “hungry” for? ...money? ...clothes? ...toys? ...security? ... good things to eat and drink? Do I have a deeper hunger for God than I have for the good things of this mortal life? Do I have a desire for holiness? Does my spirit rule over my flesh, or is it the other way around?

After we’ve examined our lives in the light of these three Scriptural categories, then we confess our sins to God. In the depth of our soul, we lay before the Lord the truth about ourselves that this “fearless moral inventory” has disclosed. Maybe we’ll offer this confession as we participate in today’s penitential liturgy. Maybe it will be later in our private prayers. Maybe it will be tomorrow. Maybe it will be in the middle of Lent. The significance of Ash Wednesday lies not in the recognition of our own sin, but in our awareness of God’s mercy, which is greater than our sins.

There is an awareness of sin that leads not to God but to self-preoccupation. The temptation is to be so impressed by our own sins and failings and so overwhelmed by our lack of generosity that we become paralyzed by guilt. This is a guilt that leads to introspection instead of drawing our minds to God. This is a guilt that can become an idol and a form of pride. Henri Nouwen said that Lent is the time to break down this idol and direct our attention – again and again – to our loving Lord. Yes, we are sinners. But we serve a God of mercy and forgiveness, whose desire is that we turn from the darkness and embrace the light.

After today, we should see the need to make some changes. Are we brave enough to make those changes, pay the price, take the steps, do the work? God will help us do that work, if we only turn to him and ask. —God will help us, but it will still be work! It will still require *our* effort and *our* willpower.

As Paul said to the people in Corinth, “Now is the acceptable time. Now is the day of salvation.” This is the time. Ash Wednesday is the day for “a fearless moral inventory,” and Lent is a season of forty days in which we can begin to do whatever is necessary in order to get moving on a journey in the Spirit, a journey from where we have been to where Christ wants to lead us.

Let us take the first step on that journey right now.