

ASH WEDNESDAY

LECTIONARY #219

READING I Joel 2:12-18

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Joel

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,
 and **relenting** in punishment.
 Perhaps he will **again** relent
 and leave **behind** him a **blessing**,
Offerings and **libations**
 for the LORD, your **God**.
Blow the trumpet in **Zion!**
proclaim a fast,
 call an assembly;
Gather the people,
 notify the congregation;
Assemble the elders,
gather the children
 and the **infants** at the breast;
 Let the **bridegroom** quit his **room**
 and the **bride** her **chamber**. >>

Joel = JOH-∗I
 rend = tear

A reading in which Joel in his role as prophet becomes the mouthpiece for the Lord; it is as if God is addressing the people directly in this reading. Proclaim this reading like Joel himself, with a sure and steady voice and so that its vibrancy will come through.

This reading makes use of frequent parallels. Give the words in pairs emphasis: "hearts" and "garments"; "gracious" and "merciful"; "slow" and "rich"; "offerings" and "libations."

The energy picks up with a series of imperative verb forms. These words are highly charged—God is telling the assembly directly what to do. "Blow," "proclaim," "call," "gather," "notify," "assemble," "let."

READING I

The prophecy of Joel is directed toward a nation that is in the midst of a great crisis. Devastation of the land was brought on both by a drought as well as by a plague of locusts. The people believed that they had been abandoned by God because of a national sin. In today's reading from Joel, Joel has a message of repentance for the people: transformation of life will result in God's favor once more.

The reading that opens our Lenten season represents Joel's call to the people to assemble to hear God's redeeming

Word. Joel's message is simple: "return to me [the Lord]." For the prophet, this return entails individual and communal transformation of heart. For him, it is not enough to fast, to weep, to mourn, and to perform outward gestures of penance such as tearing one's clothes. Instead, the people must seek the mercy of God together.

The communal importance of seeking the gift of this mercy is demonstrated by Joel's command to "blow the trumpet" and to summon the people to a public fast. People of every age are invited to seek the way of God's mercy together. God can eas-

ily peer into the hearts of each individual, but the community needs the participation of all its members if it is to display its fidelity to strive to live anew for God.

In addition to the communal acts that make visible a real willingness to return to the Lord, Joel calls the priests to a particular responsibility. They are to weep for the sins of the people and are to intercede on their behalf, asking God to withhold his punishment upon the nation. Joel suggests that if God bestows mercy instead of punishment upon the people, then other nations will see God's blessing. Otherwise,

Allow for a slight pause between the question and the final expression in the reading.

For meditation and context:

Corinthians = kohr-IN-thee-uhnz

A reading in which Paul seeks to impress upon the members of the early Church at Corinth the importance of reconciliation with God in preparation to receive God.

The phrasing in this statement, "he made him to be sin," is a little peculiar. Practice it a few times and sound it out. It's not an expression we commonly use in relation to sin. "Be" is paralleled with "know." Emphasize those two words to anchor your proclamation.

other nations might look at Israel and accuse God of being weak for not giving them aid. The passage ends with God's recognition of the people's contrition. Once again, God takes notice of the people and has "pity on his people." True repentance involves more than individuals striving to better themselves before God, it demands individuals work together to form a people that is just.

READING II Prior to the passage we read in today's second reading, Paul has been reminding the

Between the porch and the altar
 let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep,
 And say, "Spare, O LORD, your people,
 and make not your heritage a reproach,
 with the nations ruling over them!
 Why should they say among the peoples,
 'Where is their God?' "

Then the LORD was stirred to concern for his land
 and took pity on his people.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 12-13, 14 and 17 (3a)

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense. Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me.	A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me. Cast me not out from your presence, and your Holy Spirit take not from me. Give me back the joy of your salvation, and a willing spirit sustain in me. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.
For I acknowledge my offense, and my sin is before me always: "Against you only have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight."	

READING II 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2

A reading from the second Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians

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**.

Corinthians that they have been made a new creation by their membership in Christ. Furthermore, he explains that Christ is the way through which the world is reconciled with God. Being refashioned in Christ means that Christians have been called to take up Christ's ministry of reconciliation so that others may participate in this relationship between God and humanity (see 2 Corinthians 5:17-19). All of this leads him to the conclusion that Christians are called to be "ambassadors for Christ." An ambassador is not simply someone who represents another; he or she is someone

who has developed a relationship with the people to whom he or she has been sent. Because ambassadors know the life situation of the people with whom they live, they are better able to represent their needs.

Paul's point here is that Christians do not act alone in the mission of the Church. Instead, Christian ambassadors work together, satisfying the obligations of loving and serving God as well as creating a healthy community that is united in Christ. Notice Paul's use of the plural "we"—"we are ambassadors," "we implore you," and

The exhortation of the reading resolves in Paul's use of the word "acceptable." In its first appearance, you do not need to emphasize it. When it reappears, be sure to give it extra emphasis.

A reading in which Jesus provides advice for how to approach the practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Each section of advice is constructed very similarly, creating parallel expressions. Don't let them become formulaic in your proclamation. Each of these practices is important to Jesus for bringing us closer to God.

Almsgiving comes first.

TO KEEP IN MIND

Use the pitch and volume of your voice to gain the attention of the assembly.

Emphasis on "left," "right," "secret," "Father," and "repay."

Next comes prayer. The wording is very similar to that in the almsgiving section. Emphasis on "inner," "secret," "Father," "secret," and "repay."

"we appeal to you." As a spiritual leader in the community and an ambassador of Christ's Word, Paul does not stand above or apart from the people, but instead reminds all of their need to be open to the grace of God that reconciles people to himself.

In order to enact the ministry of reconciling the world to God, the Corinthians must make reconciliation among themselves a chief priority. To attain this "righteousness," the community must acknowledge the sacrifice of the cross and the grace that comes from it. The urgency for this reconciliation is great, as Paul contends that "now" is the

Working **together**, then,
we **appeal** to you not to **receive** the grace of God in **vain**.
For he **says**:

*In an acceptable time I **heard** you,
and on the day of salvation I **helped** you.*

**Behold, now is a very acceptable time;
behold, now is the day of salvation.**

GOSPEL Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

Jesus said to his disciples:

"Take **care** not to **perform** righteous deeds
in order that people may **see** them;
otherwise, you will have **no** recompense from your
heavenly Father.

When you give **alms**,
do **not** blow a **trumpet** before you,
as the **hypocrites** do in the **synagogues** and in the **streets**
to win the **praise** of others.

Amen, I say to you,
they have **received** their **reward**.

But when **you** give alms,
do not let your left hand know what your **right** is doing,
so that your **almsgiving** may be **secret**.

And your **Father** who sees in secret will **repay** you.

"When you **pray**,
do **not** be like the **hypocrites**,
who love to **stand** and **pray** in the **synagogues** and on
street corners
so that **others** may see them. >>

time for conversion of heart. Heard in our contemporary gathering today at the start of Lent, Paul challenges modern-day ambassadors of Christ to work together to discover the grace of God anew.

GOSPEL

Today's reading from Matthew is essentially taken from the midpoint of Jesus' inaugural sermon to his disciples, known as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1—7:29). In the previous chapter, Jesus instructed his disciples on what it means to be blessed in the kingdom of heaven (the beatitudes) and

how to interpret the religious law in a new way. In this passage, Jesus teaches his disciples about the proper attitude of prayer and approaches to self-discipline.

When it comes to the personal disciplines of fasting, praying, and the giving of alms, Jesus tells his disciples that actions are to be performed in such a way as to avoid gaining recognition. How easy it is to misuse these core practices as a means of measuring spiritual achievement and personal righteousness. Gaining "recompense" from the Father takes place when the sacrifice of food, the attention to prayer, and the

And finally comes fasting. Once again, similar wording. This time, emphasis on "head," "face," "appear," "Father," "hidden," and "repay."

Amen, I say to you,
they have **received** their **reward**.
But when **you** pray, **go** to your inner **room**,
close the door, and **pray** to your **Father** in **secret**.
And your **Father** who sees in **secret** will **repay** you.

"When you **fast**,
do not look **gloomy** like the **hypocrites**.
They **neglect** their **appearance**,
so that they may **appear** to others to be **fasting**.
Amen, I say to you, they have **received** their **reward**.
But 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."

gift of charity are all done from an inward attitude of selflessness. When almsgiving, fasting, and prayer are conducted in such a way as to lose the self for others, then they are rightly directed toward the fulfillment of God's kingdom. God knows the intentions of our hearts, and this is how we are to be repaid.

As we hear this Gospel passage proclaimed on the first day of Lent, it is important to return to the context of Joel's prophecy in the first reading. He calls the people to assemble. As a Christian assembly, we hear these cautionary words of

Jesus to his disciples and are reminded that our Lenten journey is meant to help us grow together as a community. While fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are certainly prescribed in order for individuals to grow in the image of Christ, they are also in place that we might understand better our dependence upon one another as brothers and sisters in the Lord. Hopefully we are not like the hypocrites who simply want to be noticed, but rather like those Jesus calls "blessed" in the beatitudes, bearing poverty in spirit, acting with gentleness and compassion, striving for righteousness,

showing mercy, exhibiting purity of heart, working for peace, and accepting persecution for the sake of justice. The season of Lent is all about our growth together in the Paschal Mystery of Christ—learning more and more how to die to self in order to live anew for others. S.W.