

ASH WEDNESDAY

LECTONARY #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.

Although we are entering a penitential season, these practices can be read with excitement. God has given us concrete actions to help conform our hearts, minds, and spirits to him.

Notice the comprehensive nature of who Joel is addressing—everybody.

READING I

As we begin this Lenten journey, today's first reading invites us to renew our biblical faith and revisit those religious practices in which we may have become lax. The prophet Joel highlights our relationship with God as the center of our biblical faith and emphasizes that we are to invest in that relationship with our entire heart. Joel's use of the phrase "with your whole heart" recalls the fundamental expression of biblical faith known as the *Shema*, which appears in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Following Moses' restatement of the ten commandments,

God, through Moses, tells the people "Hear [shema], O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength." Like devout Jews today, who still identify the first and most fundamental law given by God in Torah (see Mark 12:28-30), From a biblical perspective, to love God *with your whole heart* is not simply about fostering emotional affection for the Lord. Rather, it entails mindful loving since in the

bible (especially the Old Testament) "heart" refers to the mind. Thus, we might say that when Joel calls us to renew our love for God, emotionally engaged thinking is in order. Joel invites us to thoughtful and intentional love of God—we are to love God with our whole being. We act in this way because God first extends gracious, merciful, and steadfast love to us.

Attentive to the call to whole-hearted faith, Joel turns to traditional religious practices: fasting, weeping, mourning, offering sacrifices, and assembling God's people. All of these behaviors focus on the movement

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.

"Against you only have I sinned,
 and done what is evil in your sight."
 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 meditation and context:

We add our own plea for God's mercy and presence. Proclaim this prayer clearly so the congregation can make it their own.

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**,
 to 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. »

God's "go-betweens" (ambassadors), they make clear that their message originates in God, not themselves. At its core, this message calls us to grow in our awareness of what God has done for us in Christ. The message consists of perennial elements of the Christian call, first and foremost of which is that we are to "be reconciled to God." Interestingly, the verb here in the original Greek is a passive imperative form. This grammatical construction suggests that the command to "be reconciled to God" fundamentally entails letting God act upon us. In other words, our reconciliation with God—**a focus of every Lent—begins** with God's work upon us and on our behalf. God initiates the reconciliation process. In turn, we offer an increasingly generous response to God as we come to recognize God's grace at work in our lives.

of making a return to the Lord. The basic notion of making a return to the Lord, which can be misunderstood at times, is less about pressuring God to act mercifully toward us (something God always does) and more about taking up those practices that lead to the transformation of our hearts. Penitential practices, like those mentioned by Joel and those that we take up in this Lenten season, make us more aware of God's constant compassion for us.

Announce the first lines with pride. Ambassadors have a connotation of importance. You, too, are an ambassador for Christ. Practice until you are comfortable with the pronouns. Listeners have only one chance to understand.

Corinthians = kohr-IN-three-uhnz

READING II

When Paul and his companion (Timothy) claim to be

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.

"Now" has a particular sense of immediacy on this the first day of Lent.

Public piety is not necessarily a bad thing, but it should be authentic. This reading contrasts hypocrisy with authenticity.

Notice the consistent negative-positive constructions of the reading. Pause between sections.

The "Father who sees in secret" is repeated in this reading. Read the phrase consistently so the assembly hears the repetition. Our Lenten practices are not in vain.

shows us that Christ opens up for us a privileged experience and otherwise unimaginable status with God. We, in Christ, can claim to be both God's co-workers and God's embodied righteousness in the world. In light of these observations, Paul also offers a wise reminder that we are to take our unmerited status with God seriously, not in vain. The language of "vanity" that Paul uses here echoes the biblical wisdom tradition and gives him the opportunity to provide yet another perennial Christian perspective: it is always opportune to recognize that the moment of salvation is now. And

GOSPEL

so, as we enter *this* Lent, we recognize what God has done and continues to do for us in Christ, and we respond in kind.

Jesus' message in the Gospel, like the first reading, offers a two-fold reminder to attend to our religious practices and our interior dispositions that accompany those practices. In talking with the disciples about different spiritual practices they might engage in, Jesus highlights almsgiving, prayer, and fasting as preeminent examples. Called the "pillars" of Lent for good reason, these traditions are not in vain. Prayer animates and those in most need. Prayer animates and

"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.
 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."

renews our devotion to God and can lead us to the experience of reconciliation in the sacrament of penance. Fasting, when performed as a spiritual practice, reminds us of our vulnerability and ultimate dependence on God. As such, it can help us to reorder our priorities, thus renewing justice within us so that we may be in right relationship with God.
 Yet, for all the good that almsgiving, prayer, and fasting (or any spiritual practice) can bring, a deeper commitment to spiritual acts also entails critical attentiveness. Jesus reminds us that, without proper

discernment, spiritual practices can be done for the wrong reasons. Those disordered motivations undermine the purpose of these spiritual practices and draw undue attention to us, instead of leading others to God. Jesus' proposed remedy is to perform spiritual practices in a self-effacing, non-attention-grabbing way. So, whatever specific spiritual practices we undertake this Lent, the instruction of Jesus is clear: our works should transform our interior disposition toward greater selflessness and direct attention toward God. E.W.