

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Ash Wednesday
March 1, 2006
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A Time for Ashes
Texts: Mark 6:1-6, 16-21

"There's a time for everything," says the writer of Ecclesiastes. A time for joy and a time for sadness. A time for ashes.

Ashes are a time for contrition and repentance of wrongs we have done to our neighbor and to God. Even though we come from a church that had become obsessed for centuries with guilt and transgressions, even though we do not want to return to that dark spirituality, on the other hand we also say that this is a time for us to confess our sins and repent toward God.

The Christian way of life is about life rather than death, about hope rather than despair, about light rather than darkness. But the way to life, to hope and to the light of Christ is to recall, as the Bible does so vividly, that human beings can treat each other so wretchedly in their homes, on the streets of life and commerce, and between the nations with war -- and even in their churches.

We do not believe that human beings are inherently evil. But we do believe we all are capable of evil and have committed deeds for which we should be ashamed. Those of us who have endured war, social or family disintegration have pause to ponder at the brink of how deeply human hate, anger and greed can fall, such that we can be tempted to think people are inherently evil.

But even then, since God created all good things, we return to the good news that the Christian way of life is about life rather than death, about hope rather than despair, about light rather than darkness.

Did you notice that when you add up the days from Ash Wednesday to Easter there are not 40 days, in an echo of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, but 46. Why? Because the six Sundays during Lent are more properly called the Sundays *in* Lent. "In, but not of." The six Sundays in Lent do not belong to Lent. They are days of the Resurrection, of Easter, of life. Again, we are a people of the resurrection, of Easter, of life, of hope and of light - even in solemnities of the Lenten season of renewing our discipleship.

But this is one of those times to look inwardly with self-examination -- to look inwardly so that we might receive from outside of ourselves a word of forgiveness, of reassurance, of love.

Last night I had dreams, in color, of memories and events surrounding my former wife and my children. It was a most restless, almost sleepless night -- as if I were like Jacob struggling with God. I only came to peace and consolation when I sighed at how sad and broken I felt for how my personal struggle had affected their lives -- and continues to do so in varying degrees. I sighed to God. I sighed at the pain authenticity had wrought unfairly on my loved ones.

Human relationships are the most wonderful and most difficult of adventures at times. All of us have pain and struggles in our lives, of matters unresolved, and sometimes irresolvable. There can be things we do not want to face and take some degree of responsibility for. They are part of the puzzle of who we are.

We are also caught up in a web of social and political relationships over which we have even less or no control. But we can pray that God will work creative and redeeming ways with our leaders, religious and secular, and with our fellow members and citizens to resolve what is resolvable.

In the sacred writings and in the sacred liturgy we are asked to repent. But this word has been turned into a perversely pietistic "my sinful self and my private God" narcissism. It captures little of the meaning of the term Jesus used. But I will try to show something of what "repent" can really mean.

We are an Easter people and palm leaves and palm crosses are part of the Easter story, especially of Palm Sunday. Repentance means to take our sins, real and imagined, (yes imagined for the overly scrupulous amongst us), and as if writing them on the fronds of those palm leaves. In repentance we have that role of putting those low marks in our hearts and conscience on those leaves.

It is God, through Jesus' life, who takes those laden fronds and burns away our wrongs and burdens into smoke and ashes. And as proof that God has done this redemption in Christ for us, we are marked with those ashes with the cross of Christ. This marking of forgiveness and restarting our lives is not done by you, but by God. The ashen mark of the cross is God's word and promise to you.

We are marked with a renewal of living life in Christ, not with guilt, but out of ashes of forgiveness and beginning again. As we are marked with those ashes we are each personally addressed with words that remind us of our mortality -- not of fear of death, but out of the joy and adventure that life is in Christ -- even when death is always at the edges -- the edges of life, the wondrous gift of life.

Repentance means grasping more fully the gracious gift of life in Christ. "There's a time for everything," says the writer of Ecclesiastes. A time for ashes, and then, more so, a time for living the gift of life God has given you.

Amen

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