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Ash Wednesday

Date: Wednesday, March 1, 2017 | **Season:** Lent | **Year:** A
First Reading: Joel 2:12–18
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 51:3–6ab, 12–14, 17 | **Response:** Psalm 51:3a
Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:20–6
Gospel Acclamation: Psalm 95:8
Gospel Reading: Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18
Preached at: the Jesuit Institute **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa**.**

Today we celebrate Ash Wednesday, the day that around the world marks the beginning of Lent. Although Lent is often thought of as a time for repentance and penance – and it is certainly that – it is also a happy time because it is the way we prepare as Christians for Easter, when Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, fulfilled his mission from the Father through the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection. Lent is a time when we are able to renew our own Baptism, when we are able to turn away from our sin and return to Christ, and Christ welcomes every person back to him.

The prophet Joel says today, “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation!” And that is what we are doing and why we have come here together today.

As we observe today with fasting, and abstaining from the delights of this world, we are all returning together to God with all our heart. During Lent we renounce the delights of this world, leaving what is good so that we can choose what is better. This is why we fast during Lent. Lent is most of all a time of inner conversion. Of reflecting on our lives, our habits, our relationships, with each other and most importantly with God. It is a time to return to God. Of trying to offer God some of our time and attention, deliberately so that we can repair our relationship with Him.

Let us not waste this acceptable time, this day of salvation. Today is our chance to change, to begin anew, to repent and to be converted. We all, in some way great or small, have to change our attitude, our orientation, our way of living. As we heard last Sunday, what is our priority in life? God or Mammon? Perhaps

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something Pope Francis has written over the last year might have touched us – whether it be about having a greater concern for the environment, a greater care for refugees and migrants, or a greater love for those around us. Let us ask the Holy Spirit today to help us to make better choices. Let us always choose God. Let us always choose life. Let us always choose that which is better, and more pleasing to God.

In turning back to God, repenting and believing in the Gospel we will be purified and so be able to experience the love and light of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ shining in our hearts on Easter morning, and throughout the year.

St. Paul says today, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”. This is the Paschal Mystery which we begin today to prepare ourselves to celebrate. Christ took our sins upon himself, so that his righteousness might be imputed to us. He received our sins, and, in exchange, imputed to us his righteousness. Thus we are renewed in him, made righteous by him, by the merits of his sacrificial death on the cross.

In our psalm today we pray for a “clean heart” and a new spirit. Let us pray that the Ashes we now receive will be a reminder to ourselves that we have decided today to return to God with all our heart. Let us wear them with smiles on our faces because we are confident that in our repentance lies our salvation, and God’s love and mercy for us is certain. Let us praise God with our whole heart because he loved us first, created us and wants to save us. Let us now turn to him and offer him our whole heart, broken and bruised as it may be. God will take care of each of us.

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