

Homily
Ash Wednesday
March 5, 2025

“Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” Dear friends, today we begin a season of grace, a season of opportunity, and as Paul tells us, a season of salvation. “Now is the day of salvation.” Ash Wednesday begins the great season of Lent, and all around the world, our fellow Christians are joining with us to pray, to begin a time of reflection, a time of fasting and repentance.

The obvious symbol of this day and this season is the sign of ashes. We come forward with humility to be touched with ashes, a reminder of our mortality, and also a sign of our desire for conversion. The imposition of ashes is a stark reminder that our days on this earth are numbered, and we must prepare for a moment of judgment, a moment that will lead to our eternal destiny, either with God or apart from God. Accepting this sign of ashes is an indication that we’ve made our choice, our decision to leave behind the ways of sin and to turn once and for all toward God. We don’t wear this sign of ashes to put on a show of our piety, but to remind ourselves that we need repentance in our lives, we need God in our lives.

The word “Lent” actually comes from a word that means springtime. But it’s more than just a reference to the time of year. It’s about transformation and new life. After the dead of winter, springtime ushers in a time of new life. The whole landscape is transformed and comes to life once again. And Lent has a similar effect, but it’s even more dramatic. By our repentance and conversion from sin, we turn away from the death of sin, the bitterness of our estrangement from God. He invites us to come back to him, as we hear in the first words of our reading from the prophet Joel: “Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart...rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God.” God reaches out to us and beckons to us. And when we accept his invitation, when we do return to him with our whole heart, we experience the grace of salvation that Paul spoke of. Sin is spiritual death, but repentance and forgiveness of sin is a coming back to life.

So this day, this season that begins with the sign of ashes, a sign of mortality, is actually an invitation to life, eternal life.

In today’s Gospel, which is always heard on Ash Wednesday, Jesus calls on his followers to pray, to do penance, and to give alms. Prayer is essential if we truly desire the new life that our Lord promises. Through prayer, we join our heart to his. We enter into his presence and simply receive the gift of his love. We speak with God, but we listen too. Certainly, part of our daily prayer should be an examination of conscience and an act of repentance. We can be sure that the more often we come seeking God’s mercy, the more eager he will be to give it in abundance. So pray always, and invite our Lord every day to dwell in your heart.

Jesus also calls us to fasting, to acts of penance. It’s so easy to be filled with the things of this world, and to become satisfied with our possessions. But Jesus urges us to deny ourselves, to make room for him in our lives. By fasting, we are freed from the chains of this world, and we

are more able to resist the temptations of sin. Athletes deny themselves all kinds of things when they begin their training. We are called to be spiritual athletes, and we're striving for an eternal crown of glory.

And finally, Jesus calls us to charity, to almsgiving. If we truly love God, then we can't be indifferent to the needs of our neighbors all around us. The gift of alms, acts of charity and generosity, help us to look beyond ourselves, to live not only for ourselves, but for others. To give of ourselves is to be more fully in union with Christ, who made the ultimate gift when he gave his life for our salvation. Generosity, even in small ways, can expand our hearts, and once more makes more room for us to receive God. Like prayer and fasting, almsgiving is a path to life.

My friends, during this Jubilee year, we are called to be pilgrims, pilgrims of hope. We journey towards God with hope in our hearts for the divine life he won for us. And now, the season of Lent that we begin today is a key part of that journey, a journey of prayer, penance, and almsgiving. Let us embark on this journey with complete hope in Jesus, who offers us this day of salvation.