

Ash Wednesday

March 1, 2017

In our cycle of weekday readings for Lent, it's interesting to note that Lent falls into two categories. The first part begins today and runs through the third week of Lent. During this three and a half week period, the Gospel readings are taken from the Synoptics—Matthew, Mark and Luke—and the Old Testament readings are chosen according to their relationship with the Gospels.

The entire Gospel message for the first part of Lent is conversion. The Gospels will lead us to an awareness of making a fresh start, of fasting, prayer, almsgiving, mutual forgiveness, of being aware of those times when our hearts are hard, and the need for loving our enemies so that love becomes our path to holiness and conversion.

The readings in the second half of Lent are taken from the Gospel of John. Why the change? The intent isn't to teach us all we need to know about the life of Jesus.

Instead, the readings from John's Gospel will immerse us into the very *mystery* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In John's Gospel, Jesus is presented as the healer and life-giver, as the one who gives life through his confrontation with death and gathers into one the scattered children of God.

Well, that may all sound very nice, but what has this two part Lent have to say about Jesus and the true spirit of Lent? Well, the purpose of the first part of Lent is to highlight a certain aspect of the spiritual life that often gets forgotten about in our zeal to give up chocolate or meat as our Lenten practice.

And that forgotten aspect is a spirit of “compunction”. Compunction is a word that means to puncture. A spirit of compunction is a willingness to allow our egos to be deflated – a willingness to take a hard and honest look at the quality of our lives as authentic disciples of Jesus.

But hitting us again and again with demands which we not only fail to obey, but which we mistakenly come to recognize as beyond us, the Gospel passages are meant to confront our illusions about ourselves.

It’s kind of like when Lucy goes up to Charlie Brown and says, “You know what the whole trouble is with you, Charlie Brown?” Charlie Brown replies, “No, and I don’t want to know! Now leave me alone!” To which Lucy replies, “The whole trouble with you is that you won’t listen to what the whole trouble with you is!” When we allow the Gospel passages of Lent to puncture our hearts and self-illusions, our Lenten practices may be more effective if we actually fail in our resolutions than if we succeed.

That may sound odd, but it helps to remember that the purpose of Lent is not to confirm us in our sense of how virtuous and righteous we are, but to bring home a clear sense of our radical need for salvation.

Once we have that idea down pat, then the second part of Lent takes us from focusing on the demands of discipleship to the person of Jesus Himself. The readings from John teach us that Jesus is the way to salvation, but Jesus can only save those who know that they need to be saved.

The cross of ashes we will soon receive on our foreheads is an outward mark of our first part of Lent, but we must also trace that cross inwardly on our hearts and we do so with the spirit of compunction.

These ashes also mark the beginning of our journey that will take us to the celebration of Easter joy by embracing the salvation that Jesus offers us in the second part of Lent. More importantly, these ashes signify the journey we are making in the hope that someday we will share in the Resurrection, and experience everlasting joy in heaven.