

*"We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God!"*

If anything can sum up Ash Wednesday, the beginning to the holy season of Lent, it is these words of Paul to the Corinthians.

*"We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God!"* Paul is not suggesting that we do this because we are hoping against hope that God will forgive us although this is what it sounds like when we listen to the prophet Joel.

Joel was crying out to the people of Israel warning them that the Day of the Lord is at hand. The day of the Lord was to be a day of judgment, a terrible judgment for sins that the prophet does not describe but sins serious enough that everyone, even the infant at the breast was supposed to show up to fast, and to weep, and to mourn, to rend hearts and return to the Lord so that the Lord might relent and bless instead of destroy. The operative word here is might. God has indicated that God might be willing to be influenced by acts of repentance.

Paul's next sentence means that God gave us his Son to live as one of us so that we too could become righteous. This means we do not need to fear destruction by God – Jesus' sacrifice on the cross has redeemed us. We cannot earn our redemption. No amount of prayers, or fasting, or almsgiving is going to do that for us. By the grace of God, by the life death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ we have been given the opportunity to turn back to God in confidence that we are forgiven when we repent.

The operative word here is when, when we repent - for repent we must. Heaven knows we have much of which to repent. Sin is all around us. Our flesh is not evil; the desires of an infant to be held and fed and changed are not evil but when does a child in need become a spoiled brat, when as we start to exercise our will to achieve our desires do we start to rebel against God and what God desires for us?

Moreover we are born into societies and institutions that are inherently corrupt. Willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly we participate in all the isms that serve to marginalize people whether by race or country of origin, economic or educational status, sexual orientation or gender, age, ability or disability and so forth. This is because everything that we do has consequences. We hurt people even when our intentions are good. Sometimes we have to choose between lesser evils. I am still trying to reconcile what I have done in calling on the police to remove a man who was seeking shelter in our doorway. There are practical reasons to do so, and safety reasons to do so but I do not think that God will accept that I have done so without trying to help. Nor do I suspect I am the only one to have found themselves in a similar situation. So yes, sin is all around us.

Sin alienates us from our neighbors, sin alienates us from creation and above all sin alienates us from God. But God is always calling us back.

This is why in our baptismal covenant the priest asks *"Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?"* Our covenant recognizes the inevitability of sin and it is why we respond with *"I will, with God's help."*

It is good for us then to take one day of the year to focus on specifically on repentance as we enter a time of prayer and fasting and almsgiving. Notice how Jesus mentions all of these

in our gospel. He is adamant that we are not to do these for public acknowledgment but he does expect us to do them. Most of all he expects us to store treasures for ourselves in heaven, by which he means to reconcile ourselves to God, to open ourselves to restoring that relationship because that is the true center of our being both now and in the life to come.

Although prayer, and fasting, and almsgiving will not get us into heaven we do them in thanksgiving for the gift that God has given us in the reconciling work of his Son, Jesus Christ. We do this not out of fear but in acknowledgment, in gratitude for what we have been given, the confidence that when we repent we will be forgiven. Lent is to be penitential it is not to be punitive.

Lent is a time for deep reflection, a time for taking stock, for spending time with God and allowing God to shape us, to hone us for the rebirth we experience when we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord on Easter. We do well to remember the words in Eucharistic Prayer B when the priest prays *"In him you have delivered us from evil, and made us worthy to stand before you. In him you have brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life."* Lent is the time to live into that prayer and that promise.

Amen.