

Sr. Margaret Dorgan's Weekly

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ASHES ON MY FOREHEAD

Ash Wednesday, the Christian day of ashes, dates from the 8th century. Placing ashes on the forehead as a ceremony goes back to customs rooted in the Old Testament and in pagan cultures. Ashes are linked to dust and together they point to our human mortality.

In the liturgy, the Book of Joel addresses us with the words of the Lord, "Even now return to Me with your whole heart....Return to the Lord your God" (Jl 2: 12,13). We find echoes of Joel, one of the Minor Prophets, in the Apocalypse. The word "return" is a prophetic utterance that rings throughout scripture.

Ash Wednesday underlines our need for repentance. Its penitential character is not a wholly negative lamentation. We mourn our sinfulness. We remind ourselves where we have been faithless as the Jews did in Joel's time. But with them we hear Joel's assurance, "Then the Lord was stirred to concern... and took pity" (2:18).

God's merciful love opens the days of Lent, a time to give attention to what God has called us to in our baptism. "Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!" (2 Cor 6:2) St. Paul cries out to us.

The word "Now" wakes us up. It tugs at us to turn away from the merely trivial and direct our minds and hearts to God. To be human is to dwell in limitation. We have only so many *nows* We can waste them and then look back with regret at how uselessly we have spent them.

But a new *now* beckons me and God's compassion assures me that all can be made up in overflowing measure. I take hold of the *now* that is before me. Lent is a season to look at time in its all too rapid movement and grasp hold of the opportunity each instant contains. So let this *now* be directed to God.

Too often the period before Ash Wednesday attracts more attention. Shrove Tuesday was so named because it was based on the custom of going to confession, a shriving from sin. But currently that day and those before it call forth merrymaking. The word "carnival" which conjures up images of feasting and parades in costume originally signified a very opposite reality. Carnival comes from the Latin "carnem levare—the taking away of flesh." In earlier times in some areas, Lent required abstinence from meat for the whole stretch of forty days. And undoubtedly it was a stretch. Eventually rules were relaxed. But the pre-Lenten festivities remained and frequently to excess.

Joel would have looked at such spectacles in amazement and have shouted, "Near is the day of the Lord in the valley of decision" (Jl 4:14). Ash Wednesday summons us to make a decision for God, to walk on the path that leads to redemption. The One we choose is "gracious and merciful...slow to anger, rich in

kindness, and relenting in punishment" (Jl 2:13). Yes, we have reason to celebrate. "And do you, O children of Zion, exult and rejoice in the Lord your God...He has dealt wondrously with you" (23, 26).

If the regulations for fasting and abstinence have been considerably mitigated, we still see the Lenten season as a period for giving up something. In a small human way we express our gratitude for the divine promise, "I will pour out my Spirit upon all humankind" (Jl 3:1). Some people assign certain foods as part of their "giving up." No candy, no ice cream, no desserts, at times no meat. The list is always personal, based on what is positively enjoyable to me.

Do such offerings mean anything to God? Who would doubt it? The gift has value from the attitude of the giver. Whatever the item is that I let go, the act of passing it by involves turning my heart to God and saying quietly, "This is done for You." I reach for God in a brief encounter that quiets my spirit. But we don't have to see "giving up" as involving only material things we enjoy. More importantly, during Lent we can decide to give up certain actions that center us on ourselves and distance us from Christ.

I could decide, for example, to take a strong stand against my impatience. Whatever has become a habitual reaction needs special effort. It has established a foundation in my psyche. Because it is a habit, I spontaneously react with impatience to what annoys me. Or it could be anger, envy, pride. I feed on these tendencies and giving them up can be much harder than saying no to a piece of chocolate cake.

I make a decision to deal with proclivities which may be ingrained in my personality. I can all too easily dismiss them as "That's me." But this Me seeks to "put on Christ" (Gal 3:27). I want to let go of my impatience and to do so, I take time to consider what circumstances most arouse me to be impatient. I recognize the physical changes that tell me I'm about to lose patience. A tightening of the hands, a rush of blood, my breathing becomes more rapid. I am being warned. I foresee consequences. I consider how a calm attitude can be achieved in a trying situation. All this striving will make me a better person, more easy to live with. But that is really not my primary goal, worthwhile though it is. Every stage of this Lenten endeavor is linked to Christ, to One meek and humble of heart, Who reaches out His hand to draw me to walk where He walks. Achieving a measure of victory over impatience gives me strength to work toward other goals that make me more like Christ.

The Apostle James writes, "Be patient, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord" (5:7). He was referring to the Second Coming. But we can take his words and see how every time we refuse to give in to impatience or anger or pride, we are rewarded by a special coming of Jesus into our lives. James repeats himself, "**You have to be patient. Steady your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand**" (8).

Sister Margaret Dorgan, DCM