

“Draw Closer to God”

“You are but dust and to dust you shall return” with those words we will impose ashes on your forehead in a few minutes. In ancient times one who was repentant for a certain behavior would dress in sackcloth and ashes. Sackcloth AKA Burlap is itchy and irritating to the skin. Ashes make us feel dirty. This was a mark of remorse that people took upon themselves to show that they had done wrong and were asking for forgiveness.

The most memorable scene in the Bible of someone in sackcloth and ashes is in the Book of Job. Actually he had not done anything wrong. But he felt he must have because so much misery had befallen him. All of his children were dead, his cattle and sheep were gone, and indeed everything he seemed to value in this life had been taken from him. So he dressed in sackcloth and sat himself down on an ash heap to try to determine why he was being punished so horribly.

For many centuries it seemed that the church was mimicking Job when Lent came around. Christians were to feel miserable as they contemplated the many ways in which they had let down God over the past year. They were to repent in the hopes that they would not spend eternity in Hell. In a sense we were to exchange forty days of misery for an eternity of it.

Some of that thinking echoes in the scripture and actions of Ash Wednesday. But for seventy years or so it seems to me that the church has been turning to a less penitential concept of Lent even as the liturgy of repentance has remained with us. The forty day period of Lent is modeled on Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness. His goal was not so much repentance as discerning his call from God. He was certainly denying himself food and pleasures, but not because he had done wrong. Rather by removing creature comforts he could clear his mind to find the meaning of the words, “You are my son the beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Instead of beating ourselves up during Lent as the liturgy suggests, the contemporary church sees Lent as an opportunity to sort out our relationship with God. We are called to actively take time to “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” the messages that we encounter in scripture and the writings of the saints of the Church. We are called to step back from the frantic pace of life and focus on God. We are offered the gift of this time to sit, breathe, clear our heads and hearts, and settle into God.

Lent is not about chocolate, wine, meat, or other things that we “give up.” Deprivation is not the goal. Rather it is letting go of what is keeping us distant from God. We fast from what keeps us separate from the one who is the source of all life.

Jesus got one forty-day Lent-like period and he made the most of it. We have many Lents but we still need to be reminded that we do not have all the time in the world. The ashes can do that. They can remind us of our mortality, and in doing so remind us that our Lents are not to be wasted. We are to use them to determine how we can best serve God in the time that we have been given.

I encourage you to use this Lent well; that it may enrich your soul, inspire your heart, and strengthen your love of God for all the days of your life.