

Homily for Ash Wednesday

March 2nd, 2022

Our Campaign of Christian Service

The Collect for Ash Wednesday captures for us with great clarity what the season of Lent is all about. We pray:

Grant, O Lord, that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service, so that as we take up the battle against spiritual evils, we may be armed with the weapons of self restraint.

It is clear from this prayer that the Church interprets Lent as a campaign..... this means it is a time of the year where we are living a very focused way because we are engaged in a very real battle. How meaningful this is today, when we think of the campaign that the world is currently called to undertake and to see the inspiring way in which President Zelensky is rallying the People of Ukraine.

For the Church Lent is our time where we are called to come together under the banner of Jesus to engage in the battle against spiritual evils. What are these evils? They are described as the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. These are named explicitly in Genesis 3 where we read that when seeing the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil the first couple were seduced by its enticing call: “Try it you’ll like it”.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.¹

The lust of the flesh corresponds to the phrase that the “tree was good for food”. The lust of the eyes corresponds to the phrase: “It was a delight to the eyes”. The pride of life corresponds to the phrase: “the tree was desired to make one wise”. The Church has always understood that these three are the spiritual evils that we are always having to battle against. As we will hear on the First Sunday of Lent, it was the same three that our Lord contended against during his forty days in the wilderness..... But more about that on Sunday.

Now let me simplify this in the following way:

- Lust of the flesh can be described as an inordinate desire for pleasure.
- The lust of the eyes can be described as an inordinate desire for possessions.
- The pride of life can be described as an inordinate desire for power.

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#) (Ge 3:6). (1989). Thomas Nelson Publishers.

The threefold evil alliance of pleasure, possessions and power are the perennial opponents we face as disciples of Jesus. To contend against these three the Church calls us to both a public act of devotion and forty days of private devotion.

What is the public devotion? It is Ash Wednesday where we take to heart the reading from Joel

**Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
¹⁶ gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
assemble the aged;
gather the children,
even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her canopy. ²**

What is Zion? It is the city of Jerusalem where the people would come together for the one public day of fasting, called the Day of Atonement. It is this day that is being referenced in this reading. So important was this public fast day that even a newly married couple were to interrupt their honeymoon to share in its observance.

And what was the day about? Well, it was the day they affirmed that we are sharing in a campaign as the people of God. Such a campaign was to result in a conversion of heart, where, as we hear earlier in this same passage:

**Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing. ³**

This is the challenge we face in the Christian life, to have an outward show of piety without inner transformation. This is why Jesus challenges us in the Gospel to move from the public day of fasting on Ash Wednesday into the forty days private devotion of almsgiving, prayer and fasting. Notice that with each of these devotions, the Lord assumes they will be part of the life of a Christian. Each of them is introduced with the emphatic” When you give alms, when you pray and when you fast”.

Alms giving is the intentional offering of money to the poor or to the Church, the offering of clothing, food and other material expressions of charity. To cultivate this charity of generosity is the way we battle against our tendency to be overly attached to possessions.

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#) (Joe 2:15–16). (1989). Thomas Nelson Publishers.

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#) (Joe 2:12–13). (1989). Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Prayer is to be very concrete and private where we are growing in our relationship with God and counter the power of our desire for power, influenced by pride. Thirdly when it comes to fasting this is the intentional discipline of choosing to go without food and drink and helps us to counter the inordinate desire for pleasure. Here is the thing about fasting. After a few hours our body will demand, “hello can you feed me”. We will experience some hunger pangs. These pangs are a very tangible reminder that we are choosing to fast for a deepening desire for the things of the Lord. When we take fasting as part of our Lenten devotion it can be an opportunity for us to experience the deepening of an interior conversion of the heart.

For St. Paul in the reading from 2 Corinthians he encourages us that this is the day, when we can draw close to the Lord and say yes to the deepening of our relationship to him. Don’t put it off until tomorrow.

And see what then can happen over time. By learning to fast, we are choosing to be less self-preoccupied. The deepening our prayer life enable us to be more preoccupied with God. And to give alms is to be more preoccupied with other people.

These are the weapons of self-restraint referred to at the end of the Ash Wednesday Collect.

Grant, O Lord, that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service, so that as we take up the battle against spiritual evils, we may be armed with the weapons of self restraint.

May this public day of fasting, coupled with special prayer for Ukraine, Russia and our world allow us to be ever more committed to our holy campaign of Christian service.

I pray you have a blessed Lent.