



First week of Lent 26 February 2023 – Reflection Mgr Daniel McHugh

“You must worship the Lord your God, and serve him alone.”

I am writing this Reflection on Thursday 23 February, the day after Ash Wednesday. On my iPhone I have been watching part of the Lenten Station Procession (on Salt and Light TV) from San Anselmo to Santa Sabina on Ash Wednesday in Rome. I thought how great the Internet is, despite its dangers! Pope Francis was not the main Celebrant, but Presiding at the Mass in Santa Sabina. In his homily these words struck me:

“Lent is a time of Truth, a time to drop the masks we put on each day to appear perfect in the eyes of the world. It is a time, as Jesus said in the Gospel, to reject lies and hypocrisy: not those of others, but of ourselves”. That is something to ponder prayerfully during the Lenten Season.

I was particularly blessed yesterday, Ash Wednesday, to be main Celebrant and Preacher at St Augustine’s, Solihull. It was a last minute undertaking, so I hadn’t had the opportunity to prepare very much. I remembered a post from the day before from Father Yen Vu, the Vietnamese Chaplain, reflecting on the meaning of the Imposition of Ashes. He wrote:

“The Ashes are used as a symbol for repentance in the Old Testament to plead for God’s mercy. In the Book of Judith, it says: “All the men of Israel with their wives and children living in Jerusalem shall bow before the Temple, with ashes on their heads and put on sack cloth before the Lord” (Judith 4:11) and next 4:13 it says, “God hears their cries and sees their foolishness”. Again, when the messenger Jonah proclaimed repentance to Nineveh, “The news came to the King of Nineveh; the King left his throne, took off his robe, put on a sack cloth, and put on the ashes, they repented of their sins, they cried out to God for mercy, God heard their cries and saved them from the pit of destruction.”

The post goes on, “In the Roman tradition, the words said at the Imposition of Ashes are informed by Jesus’ command: “Repent and believe the Gospel” Psalm 50 (51) And, like John the Baptist Psalm 50 (51) summarises the deep meaning of receiving the Ashes: “Create me Lord with a clean heart, do not take away your Holy Spirit from me”. We hear the prayer echoing in in our hearts; meanwhile we are approaching the Altar of God to receive the Ashes on our heads with all ancient traditions. That action is filled with the Spirit and is a distinctive sign of internal renewal. Through such a simple, but profound and meaningful rite because it impresses the meaning of salvation: from which the Church reminds us that as weak sinners we stand before strength of the devil, and specially urges us to believe in the power of God. Ash is so rich in its symbolic meaning in the Catholic Church, it connects us to an ancient tradition in the bible; when men cry out for Repentance, God has mercy. Let’s show him our inward renewal through outward observance”.

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This post from Father Yen, highlighting the meaning of the Imposition of Ashes was so appropriate to read, difficult as the translation is in parts, just before the Congregation came forward to have the Cross of Ashes placed on their foreheads. And, though you may have missed getting to Mass and receiving the Ashes on Wednesday the ceremony is worthwhile pondering; and maybe asking if there are Blessed Ashes remaining in your Church that you can receive this week.

Another post well worth taking to heart and reflecting on I find is that of Father Terence Harrington who I see regularly on Facebook. He speaks of 3 practical steps to take in Lent if we are to grow in holiness.

- Always think well of others
- Speak well of others
- Be helpful to others

No doubt this requires “repentance”. There are many complementary strands to the Lenten Season. I love Pope Benedict’s comments on Psalm 51 (50) which we had at Mass on Ash Wednesday and again on the First Sunday of Lent. On Ash Wednesday 2012 he said in his Homily: “The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead can turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh (cf Ezekiel 36:26). We invoked him just now in the Psalm ‘Miserere’: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me (Psalm 51 (50): 10.11). That same God who banished our first parents from Eden, sent His Son to this earth, devastated by sin, without sparing Him, so that we prodigal children might return, repentant and redeemed through His mercy, to our homeland.”

We are at an important moment as we begin Lent as we seek to respond to the words of Jesus at the end of the Gospel for the First Sunday of Lent:

“You must worship the Lord your God, and serve Him alone”.

The closing prayer over the people on Ash Wednesday is for a spirit of ‘compunction’ - a recognition of our need for repentance, turning from self to Him.

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