



Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

“Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! ‘Yet even now,’ says the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.’ Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil.”

I wonder sometimes why it is that we must reach the point of impending catastrophe before we will repent, or to use non-religious language, change our ways. It takes a shot across the bow of the ship of life to convince us that unless we change course real danger lies ahead. Why? In part, it is because making the changes requires a level of honesty that can be uncomfortable, even painful.

We grow comfortable with our lives as they are and have difficulty in recognizing our true selves. The highly edited version that we present to others is much more pleasing than the real person we recognize in our heart of hearts. Ironically, some of the things of which we might most need to repent are not, at least from our point of view, negative. Some of us, for instance, know how to give and to give generously, but we have never developed the grace of being grateful recipients. We deprive those who love us and who would give to us the grace they wish to share. Some of us know how to work hard. We invest ourselves in getting the job done, but the job takes all of our focus, energy, and effort and we lose sight of those who share our lives and who deserve at least some of focus, energy, and effort. Others of us may be good at taking care of others, but fail to take care of ourselves. A bleeding heart does no one any good if it bleeds to death.

Repentance can be hard work, and so it is good to remember that it is not necessarily solitary work. The Spirit of God is at work within us, sustaining us, encouraging us, leading us, and filling us with the grace we need to turn, perhaps all at once, perhaps a little at a time, and sometimes a little at a time is the best we can do. The Spirit does that in ways that reach beyond our understanding, but the Spirit also accomplishes that divine purpose within us through the friendship, honesty, support, and love of friends, family, and sometimes total strangers.

That, I think, is what Lent is about—not berating ourselves, but seizing the opportunity, once again, to face up to ourselves, repent of our sin, and make a new beginning.

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