

Pastoral Message: March 6, 2022

For the pastoral reflection I want to focus on the readings we heard on Ash Wednesday as we begin this season of Lent. The prophet Joel gives us an image of the people of God gathering together for worship from the youngest to the elders to step outside of ordinary life to draw close to the heart of the Lord to change their hearts not just for themselves but for all people and the whole land. We bring hearts that might have developed bitterness and resentment and ask the Lord to soften them. We hear in Joel that the people wept and their hearts were softened. As the Psalm today mentions, perhaps these tears clean and heal the heart. We do this as a people of God, and we do it for the whole world in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Ukraine and in other tragic, difficult parts of the world. We begin this season of Lent praying for healing and peace for our entire world.

This past week I watched some of the State of the Union Address, and I want to mention, for spiritual reasons, not political, something that happened during the address. During the speech at one point the ambassador of Ukraine stood up. She said nothing, but, with just her presence, people on all sides of the aisle stood and applauded out of compassion for the people of Ukraine and their land. In a time of so much violence and division, with no words, I was impressed with how it seemed to bring healing, unity, and reconciliation. The reason I bring it up is because the reading from Corinthians on Ash Wednesday tells us that we are also ambassadors. Who do we represent? We are ambassadors for Christ. What happens when we enter a room in a country and world that seems to be so polarized and divided? Does our presence bring that mercy, healing, and forgiveness of Christ that changes the room because they sense Jesus' presence in us? In Corinthians, it says we are the aroma of Christ. We all know when someone has cologne or a perfume on that we pick up on the smell. In the same way when there is a stench we can pick up on that smell. What do we smell like? Do we carry the stench of bitterness, resentment, and division, or do we carry the aroma of Christ, God's mercy and love? This Lent, if we come with all that is broken within us, the Lord's mercy can heal and help us take on that smell, the aroma of Christ.

The Cross reminds us ultimately who we are ambassadors of and that we do not pray, fast, and do almsgiving to draw attention to ourselves but to grow closer to the heart of the Lord so that we may represent Christ as we begin this season. I close with these words from Pope Francis' Ash Wednesday homily. May this happen to us at St Agnes during this season of renewal as we journey towards Easter joy.

"The Ashes on our Forehead remind us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Yet upon this dust of ours God blew his spirit of life. So we should no longer live our lives chasing dust, chasing things that are here today and gone tomorrow. Let us return to the Spirit, the giver of life, let us return to the fire that resurrects the ashes, the fire who teaches us to Love." Pope Francis