

Year A Ash Wednesday Reflection Rend Your Hearts Not Your Clothing

“Rend your hearts not your clothing” is what God said through the prophet Joel – A strong warning against simply going through the motions. Jesus forcefully echoes this in our Gospel today. Jesus is **not** saying “Don’t pray in public.” Jesus is **not** saying, “Never let anyone know what you give to charity.” Jesus is saying, “Don’t let public opinion be your motivation for what you do.” Jesus is saying, “Don’t let human glory be more important to you than the glory of God.” You don’t want human accolades to be your final reward but, if accolades are what is important to you, if listing your accomplishments is your ‘go to’ in a tight spot, then that will be your final reward.

Rend your hearts not your clothing. Don’t go through the motions. As we enter into Lent, this is a hugely important message for all of us. Christian practice in many denominations, including ours – for as long as I can remember – has been to give something up for these weeks leading up to Easter...the glorious resurrection of the Saviour of the world. We sacrifice something because Jesus sacrificed his life for us – that is part of the thinking involved. What is more important is focusing on *why* God, through Jesus Christ, gave his life in an agonizing death on the cross.

His was a death that was anything but trivial and yet, what we give up through Lent generally is quite trivial – we give up chocolate or some other sweet, we give up

our morning coffee or maybe our afternoon tea, we give up eating out or maybe just 'fast food'...all of which are first-world luxuries that many people around the world, and even in our communities, don't have in the first place. How do we make sure that our Lenten sacrifice is not trivial? That we rend our hearts not our clothing?

Our motivation for giving something up through Lent matters. If you're taking the opportunity to shed a few pounds or if you want to have an answer for when someone asks what you've given up for Lent, or if it's simply because that's what you do because that's what you've always done...*that* is rending your clothing.

Lent is the time for drawing closer to God, to increase our awareness and understanding of the enormity of Christ's sacrifice, to grow in our appreciation of just exactly what that sacrifice has accomplished for us, it is the opportunity to, as we heard in Joel, "Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing."

Return to the LORD – rend your hearts not your clothing.

If you are giving up something that took up some of your time, perhaps fill that time with prayer, or with reading Scripture, or intentional quiet time resting in God's presence. If you're giving up something that is saving you money, perhaps

use that money to give food to the hungry, clothing to the poor, care for the sick...

“For whatever you do for the least of these,” Jesus says, “You do for me.”

Whatever you do during Lent, do it with the intention of drawing closer to God.

Jesus’ death is a proclamation to us that God is ready – always ready – for us to

turn again to him, God is always willing to take us back, take us in, accept our

brokenness. Lent is our opportunity to make again the conscious effort to return to

God with contrite hearts in order for God to create new and clean hearts within us.

Whether we give something up or begin something new as part of our Lenten

Practice, it is important to remember why we do these things; not so that others

can see what good Christians we are, but to draw nearer to God – to be ready and

able to live according to God’s ways in God’s kingdom that Jesus opened to us

through his death on the cross and Easter resurrection. If we set out on a Lenten

practice so to be seen by others, we are not returning to the Lord with a broken

and contrite heart and spirit; quite the opposite of that, in fact. We must

remember Jesus’ warning: “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order

to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

Rend your hearts not your clothing. The focus through Lent is on God’s work not

ours. During this Lent and afterward, let us draw closer to God and let God work

on our hearts.