

Year B, February 14, 2018
Ash Wednesday
Christ Church, Mexia

O Lord our God, grant us the grace to desire thee with our whole heart; that so desiring thee we may seek to find thee, and so finding thee we may love thee, and loving thee we may hate those sins from which thou hast redeemed us; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

This prayer of St. Anselm defines Lent for us. For Christians, Lent offers a time of thoughtful reflection, an opportunity to look within and to discern how God may be calling us to a closer relationship and mission. It also is preparation for the great Christian festival of Easter. Its origins lie in the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness, where through fasting and prayer, Jesus learned to completely trust God. And those forty days were a reminder of the forty years that the Hebrews had to wander in the desert on their trip from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land – a journey from bondage to liberation.

In his book, *Pilgrim Road*, Albert Holtz, tells us: “We Christians are called to journey with Christ into the innermost truth about ourselves, meeting on the way all of our brokenness and imperfections, but finding at our center the Holy and Living God. The inward pilgrimage of conversion is the most important voyage any of us ever takes. The traditional Lenten disciplines of self-denial, almsgiving, and prayer are, therefore, not ends in themselves, but are always at the service of this inward journey.”

Traditionally, Lent has been a time to give up something – perhaps most typically chocolate or sweets or alcohol. For some of us, me for example, this can require a lot of discipline, but I have to admit, it is easier than some other things I could give up – should probably give up. Of course, in fairness, it would be even easier to give up mushrooms or cooked carrots or a plethora of other things I don’t usually care about.

But why do we give up things anyway? Hopefully, it is to show us how addicted we have become to these things, how much we desire these earthly things, and to understand how these things can get in the way of our desire for God. Our need/desire for cigarettes, alcohol, food, prescription drugs, winning, having our way, watching TV, cursing, eating too much or the wrong things, sexual gratification, gossiping about others, working too much, passing judgment – so many things that can get in the way of our closer relationship with God, and that are harder to give up than chocolate. Fasting for a long period of time, for example, is difficult, but it can reveal to

us what it is like for those people who have to go hungry most of the time - sadly too many in this country do, especially children. In Cameron, TX almost 90% of the school district qualified for free meals at school. I believe it is about the same here in Mexia. But what do these children do in the summer when school is closed? Many experience more hunger. Fasting may serve to put us in touch more with the needs of others and how they may feel, if we choose wisely.

Lately, however, there has been more emphasis on taking up something new rather than giving up something. And that can be a good choice as well. How many of us have a truly good amount of prayer in our daily life? How many of us read the Word of God regularly, and not just read, but take the time to reflect, study, try to discern with the help of the Spirit what God is telling us in scripture? How many of us share the Good News, the gospel, with others, donate our time/work enough to support the poor and marginalized, or even invite people to come and share what we find here for ourselves in our church? So many things we could most likely do better, do more, - seeking to find God, loving God more, ridding ourselves of the sins that keep us from having that intimate relationship with God, which will bring us more peace and joy.

We could do both – give up something and take up something; there are no limits. St. Matthew gives us good guidance on how to proceed on our personal journeys; they are not for public scrutiny or validation to strengthen our egos. What we will do is to be between God and ourselves. We also are reminded today that we are not only imperfect, but also mortal, dust that will return to dust. And we are reminded that all the things that we tend to cherish in this world will also disappear.

But most importantly, we should remember that God formed us from the dust, and breathed life into us. God has been with us from the beginning, and God will be with us for all eternity. God loves us and wants so much to be close to us. That is the essence of the message conveyed by applying the ashes in the shape of the cross. The cross we will put on our foreheads is a reminder of the cross that was put there at baptism – when we were marked as Christ's own forever. So, now we begin our Lenten journey, from the bondage of sin to liberation through God's grace.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit. Amen