

Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021 (Mt 6:1-6, 16-21; Ps 51; Is 58:1-14; 2 Cor 5:20b-6:2)

**Have mercy on me, O God...blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me... Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. . . Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.**

If your heart is broken with grief over your sin, it yearns for mercy. How could we ever confess our sins to God if we didn't know for sure, that mercy and forgiveness are ours for the asking?

The *unbroken* heart tries to protect itself, hiding its secret shames. It builds up walls so no one can find out about its failings. It prides itself on knowing the truth and is unshakeable in its confidence. That's the *unbroken* heart.

The *broken* heart begs for mercy, knowing that God joyfully grants it. The broken heart is empty of *self*, and is able to receive the forgiveness and compassion of God. Indeed, God's grace can only do its healing work on the *broken* heart, when it prays for wisdom to know God's truth.

The broken heart prays with confidence: **Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. . . Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.**

Ash Wednesday draws us closer to a God we know and trust as loving, merciful, compassionate, forgiving. The ashes we receive remind us not only of our mortality—**to dust you shall return**—but also of how that dust came into being.

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, he also took in his hands the topsoil of the new land. He shaped and formed it into the very image of himself, and then he blew his holy breath—his holy Spirit—into the nostrils of his beloved children.

We were created with love, *in* love, for life on this earth, and God is preparing us for life eternal with him in heaven. That's the life *he* yearns to share with *all* people. We, his chosen ones, are **blessed to be a blessing**.

When we allow our broken hearts to be emptied of self and filled with forgiveness, we also find ourselves feeling the compassion of God for others who suffer.

Suffering humanity is all around us, and the process of healing begins even within our own families. Paul's letter to the Corinthians encouraged the early Christians to be reconciled with God on Christ's behalf. How can we be reconciled to *God* if we can't forgive those God has given us to love?

Traditionally the Lenten season has been a time for *acts of kindness, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving*, or charitable giving. Traditionally the cross of ashes has been marked on the forehead, in the same place where you received the cross of Christ in water at your baptism.

Lent is a journey with God toward Easter. It's time in the wilderness, a time to draw closer to God. A time to reconsider what God *really* expects—or at least *hopes*—from us.

Remember the words of Isaiah: **Is not *this* the fast I have chosen:**

- **to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke,**
- **to set the oppressed free?**
- **Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?**
- **when you see the naked, to clothe him,**
- **and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?**

**If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,**

***Then* your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday;**

***Then* your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear. . .**

***Then* you will find your joy in the Lord.**

Don't be afraid to recognize your sins and confess them to the Lord. He eagerly waits to remove them from you as far as the east is from the west!

*Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*

*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* Those ashes aren't a curse, nor is death a punishment. The ashes are *blessings*, an opportunity to draw nearer to God, who knew you even before you were formed in the womb, and who loves you whatever shape your dust is in.

Thanks be to God!