

Ash Wednesday (February 22): **"When you pray, fast, and give alms"**

Gospel Reading: *Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18*

1 "Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. 2 "Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 5 "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 6 But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 16 "And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Old Testament Reading: *Joel 2:12-18*

12 "Yet even now," says the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; 13 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. 14 Who knows whether he will not turn and repent, and leave a blessing behind him, a cereal offering and a drink offering for the LORD, your God? 15 Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; 16 gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. 17 Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep and say, "Spare your people, O LORD, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" 18 Then the LORD became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people.

Meditation: Are you hungry for God and do you thirst for his holiness? God wants to set our hearts ablaze with the fire of his Holy Spirit that we may share in his holiness and radiate the joy of the gospel to those around us. St. Augustine of Hippo tells us that there are two kinds of people and two kinds of love: "One is holy, the other is selfish. One is subject to God; the other endeavors to equal Him." We are what we love. God wants to free our hearts from all that would keep us captive to selfishness and sin. "Rend your hearts and not your garments" says the prophet Joel (Joel 2:12). The Holy Spirit is ever ready to transform our hearts and to lead us further in God's way of truth and holiness.

Why did Jesus single out prayer, fasting, and almsgiving for his disciples? The Jews considered these three as the cardinal works of the religious life. These were seen as the key signs of a pious person, the three great pillars on which the good life was based. Jesus pointed to the heart of the matter. Why do you pray, fast, and give alms? To draw attention to yourself so that others may notice and think highly of you? Or to give glory to God? The Lord warns his disciples of self-seeking glory – the preoccupation with looking good and seeking praise from others. True piety is something more than feeling good or looking holy.

True piety is loving devotion to God. It is an attitude of awe, reverence, worship and obedience. It is a gift and working of the Holy Spirit that enables us to devote our lives to God with a holy desire to please him in all things (Isaiah 11:1-2).

What is the sure reward which Jesus points out to his disciples? It is communion with God our Father. In him alone we find the fulness of life, happiness, and truth. May Augustine's prayer, recorded in his Confessions, be our prayer this Lent: *When I am completely united to you, there will be no more sorrows or trials; entirely full of you, my life will be complete.* The Lord wants to renew us each day and give us new hearts of love and compassion. Do you want to grow in your love for God and for your neighbor? Seek him expectantly in prayer, with fasting, and in generous giving to those in need.

The forty days of Lent is the annual retreat of the people of God in imitation of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. Forty is a significant number in the scriptures. Moses went to the mountain to seek the face of God for forty days in prayer and fasting. The people of Israel were in the wilderness for forty years in preparation for their entry into the promised land. Elijah fasted for forty days as he journeyed in the wilderness to the mountain of God. We are called to journey with the Lord in a special season of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and penitence as we prepare to celebrate the feast of Easter, the Christian Passover. The Lord gives us spiritual food and supernatural strength to seek his face and to prepare ourselves for spiritual combat and testing. We, too, must follow in the way of the cross in order to share in the victory of Christ's death and resurrection. As we begin this holy season of testing and preparation, let's ask the Lord for a fresh outpouring of his Holy Spirit that we may grow in faith, hope, and love and embrace his will more fully in our lives.

"Lord Jesus, give me a lively faith, a firm hope, a fervent charity, and a great love of you. Take from me all lukewarmness in the meditation of your word, and dullness in prayer. Give me fervor and delight in thinking of you and your grace, and fill me with compassion for others, especially those in need, that I may respond with generosity."

Psalm 51:3-6,12-4,17

3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

4 Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless in your judgment.

5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

6 Behold, you desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.