

Ash Wednesday 2015 - Delanson 9 AM Middleburgh 7 PM

First Reading: Joel 2:12-18 [*Return to me with your whole heart*]

Responsorial Psalm: Ps. 51 "Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned."

Second Reading: I Corinthians 5:20 – 6:2 [*This is the acceptable time to become the holiness of God in Christ*]

Gospel: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 [*Do not do good deeds so you will be noticed*]

♪♪ Return to God with all your heart, the source of grace and mercy;  
Come seek the tender faithfulness of God. ♪♪

That song is an echo of the first reading today: "Even now, return to me with your whole heart." Lent is a journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter. How can we make that journey and return to God? How can we seek God? How can we walk that path and open our hearts to receive God's tender faithfulness?

I see that path outlined in the prayer we call the serenity prayer -  
I see that prayer as reflecting the Gospel for this day - Ash Wednesday.  
It is, in a way, both the journey of Lent and the journey of life.

*God, Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

In the Gospel I just read Jesus talks about praying, giving alms and fasting. These are not only Christian forms of spirituality they are three of the 5 pillars of Islam. I think they can be understood and lived more deeply and practically if they are looked at through the serenity prayer, a pattern of spirituality which is both universal and which points to the way Jesus lived.

**Prayer** is about *living* in God's presence, and walking in the light of the Lord. It is an open door to *serenity*. There is a quote I used at Christmas that always opens my spirit to serenity. "Joy is not the absence of sorrow, it is the presence of God." Or "...it is the presence of love"  
When I meet God in prayer, the joy of God's love and forgiveness is enough,  
I don't have to get noticed by other people. I receive the grace to forgive  
and the courage to deal with any situation.

Through prayer, I can experience the blessing of the one who took on my sin so I could receive the gift Paul celebrates in the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading - the gift of the very holiness of God.

**Almsgiving** is a form of *courage* - the courage to see Christ in others and to be Christ for others. The courage to defend the vulnerable. The courage shown by Pope Francis & his predecessors - St. John Paul & Pope Benedict - in their opposition to war, their defense of life and their willingness to speak the truth to political and economic leaders.

Giving alms is about having the courage to love. It's about remembering that whatever we do for the least of our brothers and sisters, we do for - or to - Jesus. It is about seeing one another as beloved daughters and sons of the same Father.

**Fasting** is an exercise of the wisdom to put 1st things first. Fasting *for* peace, fasting *from* violence. It is a challenge to our culture's addiction to the quick fix. It is not just about eating or drinking, and it is not about dieting. It is about becoming more free from the compulsions our culture promotes and setting others free in turn. It is about letting go of anything that might become an idol or an addiction.

We read in Isaiah, "*This is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, ... breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them and not turning your back on your own.*" And Jesus, in his first sermon, says, "*The Spirit of the Lord has sent me to let the oppressed go free.*"

As we receive ashes today on our foreheads, let us remember that the discipline of Lent is to be a *disciple*. We are given the strength to be disciples of the one who loves us by receiving his love, and embracing him in the Eucharist, and passing that embrace on to one another. Prayer, fasting and giving alms cannot be separated  
from each other, from the Father or from Christ.

There is more to the serenity prayer than the words we usually hear. I would like to end with my own version of the Serenity Prayer and a few more of the words which Reinhold Neibuhr wrote as we begin the journey of Lent.

God, Grant me the serenity to accept the *people* I cannot change,  
Courage to change the *person* I can, And the wisdom to know *it's me*.

Living one day at a time, Enjoying one moment at a time;

Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace.

Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it;

Trusting that You will make all things right if I surrender to Your will;

That I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with You  
in the eternal now of the resurrection.

♪♪ Return to God with all your heart, the source of grace and mercy;  
Come seek the tender faithfulness of God. ♪♪