

“The Sacrifices of God”
Jonah 3 and Matthew 6
Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2009

In the blessed name of Jesus. Amen.

The season of Lent lasts for 40 days, from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday. Sundays are not counted because every Lord’s Day is a “**little Easter**” in the Church. Lent corresponds to the 40 days that our Lord Jesus fasted in the wilderness, in which He overcame the temptations of the devil. Living by faith in Christ, trusting in the all-sufficient merits of His holy life and His suffering for us, we seek to follow in His way—to put down and mortify sin and to grow in the holy life Christ has given to us. Today’s readings teach us how to do that. They instruct us in the true meaning of repentance and faith.

On the one hand, we learn from the Old Testament reading that true penitence has some outward aspects to it. Sometimes we can be tempted to believe that repenting and believing only has to do with what’s going on in our hearts. However, the account from Jonah shows us it involves our bodies, too. Jonah was sent to Nineveh by God to preach against it because of its wickedness. He declared, “**Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.**” God’s judgment was about to come down upon them for what they had done.

Amazingly, it is written that the people of Nineveh believed God. You wonder what might happen if Jonah went to one of our great cities today and cried out against them because of their wickedness, violence, and immorality. The cynic in me thinks that he would be quickly dismissed as just another religious crackpot. But here in Nineveh, the Law of God was not met with rebellion, but it accomplished its primary purpose of leading the Ninevites to repentance. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the least of them to the greatest. Even the king of Nineveh laid aside his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. The king announced to the people: “**Cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.**”

Notice here how the repentance of the Ninevites involved their whole being. It wasn’t purely a spiritual matter but a bodily matter too. The two go together. They fasted and put on sackcloth as a way of humbling the flesh along with the spirit. They put themselves in the ashes as a sign of death they deserved. “**Earth to earth, ashes to**

ashes, dust to dust.” Furthermore, their repentance involved the bodily act of turning away from evil, stopping the sinful deeds, which they had been doing. They didn’t just say, “Gee God, I’m sorry” while all the while planning to continue the same way of living. Their belief in God’s judgment was real. Their desire to change was real.

Let it also be the same way for us these 40 days of Lent. Whatever your pet sins may be—gossiping, gambling, drinking, greed and stealing, lust and sexual immorality, anger and losing your temper, grudge-holding, vengeance-seeking, misusing God’s name, laziness, self-righteousness—whatever it is, acknowledge that you have invited God’s just judgment by it. You have deserved nothing but death and hell. Repent, turn away from your sin and turn to God for mercy and help. That is literally what the word “repent” means, to turn, to turn around from embracing the things that lead to death to embracing the things that lead to life in Christ.

Even the Gentile king of Nineveh turned to the Lord in his repentance, declaring, “**Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?**” The Ninevites put their hope not in their own turning; their own works of repentance, but in God’s turning. They relied on the hope that God would turn away from the judgment He had declared on the city. They believed the Lord to be good and merciful, and through that faith, they were saved. It is written, “**Then God saw . . . that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.**”

In a very real way, the message of God to you this day is the same as Jonah’s, “**Yet forty days and judgment is coming.**” For Good Friday is about 40 days away. As we contemplate that coming judgment, we lose our appetite, so to speak. When a person is in sorrow or troubled or focused intently on a future goal, very often he won’t be able to eat. So also, as we enter this 40-day season, we engage in a holy fast, that our hearts, minds, and bodies may be more devoted to the Word of God and prayer. Like the king of Nineveh, we set our hope on the fact that God will turn His fierce anger away from us, so that we may not perish but have everlasting life.

In fact, we live in the sure confidence that our Lord will turn His fierce anger from us, because He has turned it elsewhere, on His own beloved Son, who bore our judgment for us on the cross. The Father executed our disaster on Christ. Therefore, He relents from bringing it upon us, and He does not do it. Jesus was laid low in the sufferings of hell and

the ashes of death so that, as we lay ourselves low with Christ in the ashes of penitence, we may be raised up with Him to new life, the life we celebrate at the high feast of the Easter.

As we engage in the outward Lenten disciplines of almsgiving and prayer and fasting, Jesus reminds us to do these things for the right reasons and with the proper attitude inwardly in our hearts. He says, **“When you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.”**

Christians do not horde worldly wealth. For we know that God is the Giver of all good and perfect gifts; and we trust that He will always provide for us, even as He does the birds of the air. By such faith we are freed to use our monetary resources in love towards others, to take what we have freely received from God’s right hand and freely give it for the good of our neighbor in need.

However, even such good deeds can be perverted and twisted back in on the self. Therefore, Jesus exhorts us to do our charitable giving secretly, to the point that our left hand doesn’t even know what our right hand is doing. In this way, the act can be entirely one of love, that is, one that receives no personal benefit such as worldly acclaim and glory, but one that is done solely for the sake of the neighbor and to please God alone. To give in this way is to find one’s satisfaction in the eternal praise of God and not the temporal praise of men. Jesus Himself is our reward, who will indeed be shown openly to us on the Last Day. He Himself is our wealth, as it is written, **“You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.”**

Jesus also alerts us here to the wrong and the right way to pray. **“When you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”**

We are taught here to guard against making a show of our prayers, always making known to people how often we pray or whom we're praying for, and the like, to make ourselves look more spiritual in the eyes of others and to be honored by them. Prayer is not directed toward man but toward God alone. It cares not what others think, be it good or bad. It trusts in the Lord and seeks only Him and His help. The "reward" given to such prayerful faith is precisely that which it trusts in, namely, God Himself—to receive His gifts, to live in His presence, to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Jesus finally speaks here of the wrong and the right way to fast. **"When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."**

Christians fast and engage in other forms of self-denial not in order to be noticed by others. For such notice will pass and fade away. We do so rather in order to be purged of worldly loves and worldly desires and to direct our hearts to the eternal Creator who said, **"Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."** Fasting is not done for any particular sort of gain or for the improvement of one's health, but simply so that we may learn to hunger and thirst for the righteousness of Christ given in His words and sacraments.

Jesus said, **"Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you . . . I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. . . If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world. . . Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."** Fasting in regards to the world, Jesus invites us to feast on Him who died and rose for us, to believe in Him, to receive His true body and blood so that we may be forgiven and share in His everlasting life, we in Him and He in us.

This is what it means to lay up for yourself treasure in heaven. For moth and rust cannot destroy and thieves cannot break in and steal this treasure which Christ has won for you.

Endure patiently in the way of the cross, looking forward with sure confidence in the Easter victory feast-Christ's resurrection, and our own resurrection when He comes again. In the name of the father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.