

Ash Wednesday

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Ash Wednesday

Scripture reading: Col 3.1-4

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your[a] life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Today is a strange day. It is Ash Wednesday, and it is also Valentine's Day. At the same time as we gather here to begin a season of Lent, and to seal our foreheads with ashes, and as Christians think of what we shall be giving up for Lent, all of society around us, and we ourselves, are celebrating the joy of human love. As some Christians are deciding to give up dessert for Lent, many people around us, and we ourselves, are buying chocolates for our significant others. As we consider fasting, all of society around us is feasting.

When you look at it this way, we Christians seem to be a sorry lot. We are expected to live these next 40 days with long faces of sorrow and repentance while all around us people live for the joy of the moment in a society whose motto may well be "eat, drink, and be merry."

Oddly enough, however, the origins of Lent are not to be found in practices of regret and wailing. The earliest signs we have of the beginning of what today is Lent was a number of weeks in which candidates for baptism, after a period that could well take two years of learning from a mentor and training in the Christian faith, would finally be baptized very early on Easter morning. As Easter approached, they will go traditional. And of instruction, now directly under

the bishop, and probably meeting daily. They were preparing for the most momentous and joyous event in their lives, their death and promise of resurrection in Jesus Christ. That Easter morning, the greatest day of the entire year, would also be the greatest moment in their lives. It was for that they were preparing. It was in preparation that, costly as it may be, was brightened by the promised joy of Easter.

Soon the practice arose, as these new candidates were making their final preparation for baptism, for the rest of the church to be also preparing for a renewal of their own vows of baptism on the same Easter when the new believers would be baptized.

Then, slowly through the centuries, things began to change. The time came when Easter was no longer the focal day in the Christian calendar, but Good Friday. Faith was focused on the cross, and Easter became little more than the vindication of the Crucified. Now Lent was no longer looking forward to the joy and the promise of Easter, but rather to the pain of the cross, focusing attention on our sin which led to such pain, and on a quest to join the Crucified by means of various types of renunciation, fasting, and even self-punishment.

Hence the long faces, hence the weariness of Lent.

But actually the purpose of Lent is to prepare for the celebration of Easter Sunday. To prepare for the most glorious and joyful date of the year, which announces and joins us to that most

glorious day in our lives, when, as Paul says, Christ who is our life will be revealed, and we also will be revealed with him in glory.

As we look at what Paul says in the passage that has been read, it is clear that we are talking about death. Paul says it bluntly: "You have died." We are not just talking about giving up a few things, fasting a few days, or attending church more often. We are talking about dying. What Lent does is remind us that we have died. This is much more serious than forgoing desserts or not eating meat. This is death! As noted Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner would say, your death began when you were baptized, and your baptism will be complete when you die.

But then, surprisingly enough, this is not a message of sadness. As we read what Paul says, it is clear that having died is not a curse but a blessing; that is not something to mourn, but rather something to celebrate. I have died. Hallelujah! You are dead. Thanks be to God!

It is a joy to know that this old self whose thoughts and actions I have every reason to bemoan, this self that still gives me so much trouble, is actually dead! I don't even have to kill it. It is dead! By virtue of this baptism to which Lent points, this baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, I am already dead. As Paul says, our life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life is revealed, then we also will be revealed with him in glory.

Thus we enter this season of Lent, so often misunderstood and so often misused. We do not

enter it as a particular time of sadness and moaning. On the contrary, we enter it in the assurance that our sadness, our moaning, and even our sin have been overcome when our Lord Jesus Christ, upon rising from the dead, killed death itself. We enter it as a time to celebrate and practice this strange new life which we already enjoy, even though it is still hidden with Christ. We give up whatever we give up, not as a way to undo our sin, which Christ has already undone, but as a way to remind ourselves of this surprisingly joyful truth that we are dead, that our life is hidden with Christ in God, and that when Christ who is our life is revealed we too will be revealed with him in glory.

In the meantime, we who are dead to the old life and still live in it, we whose life is hidden with Christ, we can celebrate the joys of creation. In the meantime, we thank God for those others around who enhance this Valentine's Day. But do so in a different way, because we know that those others, and this Valentine's Day, and all the days of our life, are in the hands of the same one in whom our entire and true life is hidden. The ashes that we wear are not a sign of gloom, but a joyous reminder that even now, in the meantime, we belong to him.

So be it.