

Reading for Ash Wednesday

18th February 2026

First reading

Joel 2:12-18

'Rend your hearts and not your garments.'

Thus says the Lord: 'Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; 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 he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God?

Blow the trumpet in Sion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. 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?"'

Then the Lord became jealous for his land and had pity on his people.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 51(50):3-4. 5-6b. 12-13. 14, 17. R cf. 3a

Have mercy on us, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your merciful love;
according to your great compassion,
blot out my transgressions.

Wash me completely from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

My transgressions, truly I know them;
my sin is always before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned;
what is evil in your sight I have done.

Create a pure heart for me, O God;
renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence;
take not your holy spirit from me.

Restore in me the joy of your salvation;
sustain in me a willing spirit.

O Lord, open my lips
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

Second reading

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2

'Be reconciled to God. Behold, now is the favourable time.'

Brothers and Sisters: We are ambassadors for Christ; God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, 'In a favourable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.' Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Gospel Acclamation

Cf. Psalm 95(94):8a, 7c

Glory and praise to you, O Christ.
Harden not your hearts today,
but listen to the voice of the Lord.
Glory and praise to you, O Christ.

Gospel

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

‘Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’

At that time: Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Beware of practising your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

‘Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

‘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 others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 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.

‘And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’

Short reflection on the reading for today

As we take the ashes on our foreheads, we remember the purpose of Lent: it is an exercise in cleansing and holy desire, helped by some penitential practices: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We begin this season by receiving ashes on our foreheads, as a cross. Lent lasts forty days in imitation of the time Jesus spent in the desert before starting his public ministry. What is the purpose of Lent? It is to prepare us for a more effective involvement in our vocation as Christians.

“The entire Christian life,” said St Augustine, “is an exercise of holy desire.” He does not say that we should annihilate our normal, human desires, but we should raise and purify them. Our desires are far too small if we look for fulfilment only in what this world offers by way of transient satisfactions, but God wants us to have so much more — his very Self. During Lent we seek to tune in to higher desires — our longing for God. In today’s Gospel Jesus shows the way: prayer, fasting and almsgiving, the classic Lenten practices.

Of these, prayer has first place. Our eternity will be an eternal relationship with the living God in the Communion of Saints. That relationship begins in this life — or it does not begin at all. Our main prayer is by sharing in the Mass, the loving sacrifice of Christ which opens heaven to us. Prayer is the foundation of our friendship with God, and it opens the way to eternal life.

Fasting is somewhat more tricky for us today. While we should certainly enjoy food and the conviviality that often accompanies a good meal, we should also find a place for fasting. The goal of Lenten fasting is not to have a sleek body one can be proud of. Some saints were quite corpulent, others were virtual skeletons, but they had this in common: They practiced voluntary self-denial in order to sharpen their appetite for God.

All of us resonate in some way to the decency of almsgiving. Lent is a suitable time to rid ourselves of some of the clutter in our life. With a bit more vision, could we perhaps do more to serve the needy, not so that people will consider us generous, but to imitate God’s generosity to us?

Augustine speaks of the cleansing of the heart, to free us for holy desire: "This will be effective only to the extent that we free ourselves from infatuation with this world. Like the example I have used already, of filling an empty container. God means to fill each of you with what is good; so cast out what is bad! If he wishes to fill you with honey and you are full of sour wine, where is the honey to go? The vessel must be emptied of its contents and then be cleansed."