

Ash Wednesday

Welcome to Day One in the desert! There are 39 to go!

And the question is this: How shall we use this sacred time?

While it is true that throughout the year we are called to hold up our hearts to the light of God, it is this time of Lent that a whole season is devoted to that very task.

Our heart, as individuals and as a community, is what God asks for. What this season of Lent recognizes is that what we often give to God is not our heart, but our mouth.

What we often give is our talk, rather than our walk.

"Confession is good for the soul," the wise man says, but confession is hard on the ego. We are justifiers by nature.

It began a long time ago, with our very first parents: Adam and Eve.

"She made me eat it!" he said.

"The snake tricked me!" she said.

And ever since then, we human beings have perfected the art of "not my fault." And we've got a thousand lawyers to back us up!

The problem is not that we are bad, but that we are blind. Not that we are evil, but that we are deaf. Thank God for Jesus, who came to give sight to the blind; hearing to the deaf.

Holding your heart, holding mine, to the light of God --- what do you see?

If you're like me, you probably see, in God's light, way too much stinginess --- way too much fear of losing control --- way too much judgment harshly dished out --- way too much anger, prejudice, self-righteousness, envy, pride and fear.

It is not a pretty picture.

Soon we will read the 51st Psalm.

Tradition has it that King David is its author. He wrote it after it dawned on him that having Bathsheba's husband killed, so he could take her as his umpteenth wife, was a truly rotten thing to do.

He says, in part:

"Indeed, I have been wicked from my birth, a sinner from my mother's womb."

This is hard, isn't it? Especially in today's world, where we are each of us, at worst, misunderstood, or lack self-esteem.

It's hard to see myself that way; and I refuse to hear myself spoken of that way.

Yet here I am, and here you are too, this Ash Wednesday, perhaps, because in some compelling way, each of us wishes to truly see (even with hands covering half closed eyes), each of us wishes to truly hear (even with ear plugs at the ready), who we are in truth.

And what we will see, what we will hear, is not that God demands perfection (as we define it), but that God desires, as King David came to understand, "a troubled spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

What Jesus worked so hard at was especially, to convince society's good folks, the church going folks, the socially responsible and respected folks, that our definition of goodness often doesn't match God's definition of goodness.

For the good people, being good means looking good, following the rules, usually playing fair, and being sure about being A-Okay in God's eyes (especially compared to the riff-raff who aren't).

But Jesus would have none of this.

Instead, he invites us into a much simpler, though much more difficult, Way. It is this:

Wherever God leads: Follow.

Whatever God asks: Give.

Whoever God places in front of us: Accept.

Such is the Way of Jesus Christ.

Let us begin.

+amen