

# *Gratitude Foundation*

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*“Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?  
Has only this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?”*

(Lk. 17:15-17)

## **Ash Wednesday**

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*“In all things give thanks, it is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”*

(1 Thess: 5:18)

# Ash Wednesday

## Reading 1

### Joel 2:12-18

Even now, says the LORD,  
return to me with your whole heart,  
with fasting, and weeping, and mourning;  
Rend your hearts, not your garments,  
and return to the LORD, your God.  
For gracious and merciful is he,  
slow to anger, rich in kindness,  
and relenting in punishment.  
Perhaps he will again relent  
and leave behind him a blessing,  
Offerings and libations  
for the LORD, your God.

Blow the trumpet in Zion!  
proclaim a fast,  
call an assembly;  
Gather the people,  
notify the congregation;  
Assemble the elders,  
gather the children  
and the infants at the breast;  
Let the bridegroom quit his room  
and the bride her chamber.  
Between the porch and the altar  
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep,  
And say, "Spare, O LORD, your people,  
and make not your heritage a reproach,  
with the nations ruling over them!  
Why should they say among the peoples,  
'Where is their God?'"

Then the LORD was stirred to concern for his land  
and took pity on his people.

## Responsorial Psalm

### Ps 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 12-13, 14 and 17

R. (see 3a) **Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.**  
Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness;  
in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.  
Thoroughly wash me from my guilt  
and of my sin cleanse me.  
R. **Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.**

For I acknowledge my offense,  
and my sin is before me always:  
"Against you only have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight."  
R. **Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.**

A clean heart create for me, O God,  
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.  
Cast me not out from your presence,  
and your Holy Spirit take not from me.  
R. **Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.**

Give me back the joy of your salvation,  
and a willing spirit sustain in me.  
O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.  
R. **Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.**

## Reading 2

### 2 Cor 5:20—6:2

Brothers and sisters:  
We are ambassadors for Christ,  
as if God were appealing through us.  
We implore you on behalf of Christ,  
be reconciled to God.  
For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin,  
so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

Working together, then,  
we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.  
For he says:

*In an acceptable time I heard you,  
and on the day of salvation I helped you.*

Behold, now is a very acceptable time;  
behold, now is the day of salvation.

## Verse Before the Gospel

### See Ps 95:8

If today you hear his voice,  
harden not your hearts.

## Gospel

### Mt 6:1-6, 16-18

Jesus said to his disciples:

"Take care not to perform righteous deeds  
in order that people may see them;  
otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father.  
When you give alms,  
do not blow a trumpet before you,  
as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets  
to win the praise of others.  
Amen, I say to you,  
they have received their reward.  
But when you give alms,  
do not let your left hand know what your right is doing,  
so that your almsgiving may be secret.  
And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

"When you pray,  
do not be like the hypocrites,  
who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners  
so that others may see them.  
Amen, I say to you,  
they have received their reward.  
But when you pray, go to your inner room,  
close the door, and pray to your Father in secret.  
And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

"When you fast,  
do not look gloomy like the hypocrites.  
They neglect their appearance,  
so that they may appear to others to be fasting.  
Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward.  
But when you fast,  
anoint your head and wash your face,  
so that you may not appear to be fasting,  
except to your Father who is hidden.  
And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you."

## **Exegesis**

### **Joel 2:12-18**

The *Book of the Prophet Joel* is believed to have been written about 400 years before Christ. The Prophet is responding to a widespread pestilence of locusts that has ravished the land. The insects destroyed all the crops and the land lay barren. The result was great famine. There was not even wheat or wine for the ceremonial offerings to God. There is an apocalyptic tone that precedes our passage today. There is a resultant sense of urgency. Now is the time to repent and turn back to God.

The call from the prophet is intense, e.g. “Rend your hearts open.” The underlying Hebrew word means to tear violently as an angry person would rip a piece of cloth in two with one great force. The next time we see this expression in the lectionary readings will be on Good Friday. The moment that Jesus died on the cross the temple veil was rent in two from top to bottom. That man-made curtain, separating the people from God, i.e. the inner sanctuary, was destroyed by God once for all. With that same intensity we are now called to tear our hearts open.

God responds in Verse 19: “The Lord answered and said to His people: *See I will send you grain, and wine and oil, and you shall be filled with them; no more will I make you a reproach among the nations.*”

### **Ps 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 12-13, 14 and 17**

Psalm 51, one of the penitential psalms, is a personal lament. The historical heading relates the psalm to the incident of David’s adultery with Bathsheba (2Sam 11-12)<sup>1</sup> The structure is lament: prayer for the pardon and confession of sin; prayer for restoration, praise of God before the community, and the sacrifice of a humble heart.

### **2 Cor 5:20—6:2**

Jesus was acknowledged as sinless (Heb 4:15, 1 Pt 2:22, Jn 8:46. 1 Jn 3:5) yet through God’s choice he came to stand in that relation to God which normally is the result of sin.<sup>2</sup> The Passion is this reality, that Jesus takes on our sins and takes those sins to the Cross, that he travels to the depth of God forsakenness for us. That ultimate sacrifice out of love for us begs our response. Now is the time. Our salvation depends on our response. We must allow him to take our sins away. It is the only avenue of reconciliation with God and only then can we become ambassadors for Christ.

## Exegesis (Continued)

### Mt 6:1-6, 16-18

Matthew 6:1-18 consists of the third part of the *Sermon on the Mount*. It includes the teaching of Jesus on the three acts of piety, i.e. “When you give alms... When you pray... and when you fast.” The verses omitted from our pericope today, verses 7-12 make up Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer. The three acts of piety; almsgiving, prayer, and fasting must be sincere and done for the right reason. Even when done in a community setting, they must ultimately be personal and private vis-à-vis God.

The term for almsgiving is *eleemosyne* which can also mean *mercy*. (see Matt 9:13; 12:7) The context demands the specific, concrete meaning. Kindness to the poor is praised in Prov 14:21, 31; Isa 58:6-8. Nevertheless, the personal, spontaneous giving of alms was considered one of the marks of the pious (see Job 29:12, 16).<sup>3</sup>

Jesus is calling us to an interior life of prayer, to go into the inner room of our heart. The Greek word *tamien* can be referred to a *storage room* or pantry or the innermost room in the house. In either case the idea is the room least likely to attract public notice. Perhaps such a room had no windows.<sup>4</sup>

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1. New Jerome Biblical Commentary, Brown, Fitzmeyer, Murphy, P.H. p. 534  
2. New Jerome Biblical Commentary, Brown, Fitzmeyer, Murphy, P.H. p. 822.  
3. Sacra Pagina, The Gospel of Matthew, Donahue, Harrington, M.G. p. 94.  
4. Sacra Pagina, The Gospel of Matthew, Donahue, Harrington, M.G. p. 94.

## Reflection

The great Greek philosopher Socrates once said, “The un-reflected life is not worth living.” It seems that many people today, at least from my vantage point, are living on the surface of life. As the pace of life seems to be ever increasing, there is often little time for introspection. I know my own experience of the interior life that I knew as a child seemed to wain in the early years of my career as an accountant. My life was driven by the next task, the next challenge, the next problem, the next situation that demanded my attention. My life was preoccupied by the mundane. By the grace of God, I caught myself one day and jumped off the *hamster wheel*. As I went searching for more, searching for God the journey took me inward.

I came across a story years ago. I first read it in one of the books of Fr. John Powell S.J. As the story goes a famous artist was working on a large granite statue. Day after day the elderly man chipped away at this huge stone. Every day a little boy would come and sit for hours watching the master at work. The little boy would bring the man water from time to time and once and a while a little treat from his mother. The little boy remained quiet so as not to disturb the great artist. Days and weeks went by. Finally, it was complete. The masterpiece was a beautiful life-sized lion. The little boy stood next to the man admiring the finished statue. Then the little boy could not keep quiet anymore and the question he had been wrestling with burst out, “Sir, how did you know that there was a lion inside of that rock?”

St. Augustine said, “God is closer to us than we are to ourselves.” He talked about the journey within, into the inner-most man. The journey into the depth of our soul; the inner journey, is a discovery not only of our true selves, but it is a journey to God. God is already always there, the eternal presence. God is not a Supreme Being somehow in opposition with us. God is being itself. To the extent that we live and move and have being we share in the very life of God. He is the ground of our being. The human soul is the receptor of that life. With the gift of freewill we have the ability to remain connected to that life, or we have the ability to cut ourselves off from the source of love and mercy and life.

This season of lent is the acceptable time for all of us to rend our hearts open, to go into that inner room, and to do a little spring cleaning. The call to repentance is the encouragement to make that inward journey. We will find that God is waiting for us with open arms. Like the father of the Prodigal Son, He will run down that road to embrace us. And that is where metanoia happens.

*Fr. Glenn*

## Personal Witness

I was blessed to be born into a very devout Catholic family. From a newborn I attended Mass and every devotion that my little country parish offered. One of my earliest childhood memories was of receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday. I was probably four or five years old. I remember being in line behind my grandpa and in front of my father. Unlike the communion line that I was too young to take part in, I was in line to receive ashes on my forehead. I will never forget those words, "Remember man that you are dust and unto dust you shall return." I recall feeling rather good about myself being called a man. I was not too happy about the *dust* part. Especially since I took a bath on Saturday night.

It was spring and every spring my father would burn the fields around the homestead. He probably had a little pyromania in his blood as he seemed to really enjoy this annual tradition. Inevitably the fire would get out of hand, jump the road, burn the machine shed, etc. Every year was an exciting adventure. The day that the burning permit was issued the local volunteer fire department went on high alert. There were reasons for this annual fiasco. First, the wood ticks were making their way into the area. They were thick in the spring in the tall grass. Burning the fields at the right time would almost eliminate them completely. And secondly, burning the old dead grass would make room for the spring grass to break through. And finally, the ashes provided good nutrition for the grass and wildflowers and some nice wild strawberries.

The next day it was always interesting to survey the damage. The fields were dark black covered with the morning dew. Mom loved it when we ran through the fields and tracked the soot into the house. Within a few days the first spring rain would come. If you sat and watched long enough you could literally see the field start to turn green. This is my favorite image for Ash Wednesday. If we burn off the old stuff in us that is choking us, if we burn off all that is separating us from God, ourselves, and others; then new life will have room to spring forth. The Spirit of God that we connect with will by its very nature flow in and through us and burst into the world. Eventually we will call that Easter.

*F. Glenn*