

ASH WEDNESDAY

The Jewish Hasidic tradition teaches that everyone should have two pockets in their coats with a slip of paper in each pocket.

One slip should say: “I am only dust and ashes”. The other slip should say: “For me the whole universe was created”.

Sometimes we need to remember that first slip of paper, as we will do tonight, if we choose to be marked with the ashes of repentance. Other times we need to remember the second slip of paper, to remember that we have been adopted by God in Christ, that through Him God forgives us and makes us joint heirs with Christ of all that has been made. We do this every time we receive the sacrament of God’s love for us in Christ Jesus, the Holy Communion, the Eucharist.

Sorrow and joy. Repentance and forgiveness. Humility and joyful confidence. Fasting and Feasting, these are the poles around which our life in Christ revolve, these are the things that we need to speak to one another in our hearts and our minds and our souls, the things that the Holy Spirit seeks to bring to life within us as He fulfils His role of both convicting and comforting us, and leading us in holiness and righteousness to the springs of living water prepared for us from the beginning of time.

And never more so in Lent, the season in which we are especially called to remember the sacrifice Jesus made for us on the cross, the season in which we are specially called to prepare ourselves for both His death and His resurrection, knowing as we do so that as we die with Him, so also we will rise with Him.

Tonight is the beginning of the season of Lent, the beginning of the season in which we are called to a holy fast and to a long and thoughtful consideration of the mystery of our faith, that mystery summed up in the words, “Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again”, as well as in the words: “I am only dust and ashes”, along with the words, “For me the whole universe was created”.

We should embrace both these statements tonight, as we have both sorrow over our sins and joy over our salvation, and if we choose to do so, as we are marked with the ashes of mortality and repentance. We also should embrace both these statements as we eat the bread of forgiveness and drink the wine of eternal life when we participate in the Eucharist. Another occasion to embrace both these statements is as we humble ourselves to live as lowly servants and hear in joy we are the beloved children of God.

As we begin our Lenten journey today, we are called to a holy fast and a holy feast in each of the days of this season, a fast in which we rend our hearts and not our garments, one in which we act as ambassadors for Christ, and allow God to make His appeal through us to the world.

During the season of Lent let us fast from worry, and feast on divine order by trusting in God. Fast from complaining, and feast on appreciation. Fast from negatives, and feast on affirmatives. Fast from unrelenting pressures, and feast on unceasing prayer. Fast from hostility, and feast on tenderness.

Fast from bitterness, and feast on forgiveness. Fast from self-concern, and feast on compassion for others. Fast from the shadows of sorrow, and feast on the sunlight of serenity. Fast from idle gossip, and feast on purposeful silence. Fast from judging others, and feast on the Christ within them. Fast from

emphasis on differences, and feast on the unity of life. Fast from apparent darkness, and feast on the reality of light. Fast from thoughts of illness, and feast on the healing power of God.

Fast from words that pollute, and feast on the phrases that purify. Fast from discontent, and feast on gratitude. Fast from anger, and feast on optimism. Fast from personal anxiety, and feast on eternal truth. Fast from discouragement, and feast on hope. Fast from facts that depress, and feast on truths that uplift.

Fast from apathy, and feast on enthusiasm. Fast from suspicion, and feast on truth. Fast from thoughts that weaken, and feast on promises that inspire. Fast from problems that overwhelm, and feast on prayer that uplift.

Or, in the words concerning fasting by St. John Chrysostom, words concerning holy living and the fasts that we observe to help make us more holy: “Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works. If you see a poor person, take pity on them. If you see a friend being honored, do not envy them. Do not let only your mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast, by being free of acquiring material and worldly things. Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sin. Let the eyes fast, by disciplining them not to glare at that which is sinful. Let the ear fast, by not listening to evil talk and gossip. Let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust criticism. For what good is it if we abstain from birds and fishes, but bite and devour our brothers and sisters?

May the One who came to the world to save sinners, strengthen us to complete the fast with humility, and pray that He may have mercy on us and save us”.

AMEN.