

Ash Wednesday (A)
(Joel 2:12-18 / Matthew 6:1-6,16-18)
05.03.2014

Lent engages us to make a journey: a journey to Easter. It engages us to make a journey from slavery to freedom, a journey to the Promised Land, a journey to that place where we can be with God, caught up in His life, filled with His blessings.

This journey is essentially an interior journey; it is a journey of the heart.

It is a journey into the depths of our being, an inner journey to that place where God dwells and where He awaits us. God dwells within us!

This explains Jesus' insistence, in today's gospel passage, upon going into our room and closing the door to be there with God in prayer. This room of which Jesus speaks is not just a particular physical space (although the physical environment in which we live is important); it is really the disposition of our hearts that Jesus is talking about here.

Let's be honest.

We all live so much of the time on the surface of things. We live much of the time far removed from our hearts.

Often we give more attention to the exterior appearance of things than we really should. Externals can matter too much to us. We can be more obsessed with appearances than we are concerned with how and where we are really at interiorly – how and where we should be interiorly.

We can be so busy *acting* (yes, acting: being hypocritical), *acting in the presence of men* (to quote the gospel), when what Jesus calls us to be is *real*. The Lord's calls us to be real within our self ... and before Him and before others.

The Lord does not want to see any of us condemning ourselves/reducing ourselves to live a phoney life!

A good hypocrite/a good actor can give the appearance of being concerned for others, but really their concern is that others be turned toward them, attentive to their acting ... their real concern is that others *see and note their good works*, as the gospel puts it.

What Jesus is alerting us to today is that every good thing can be done for the wrong reasons: alms' giving, prayer, fasting ... all these good things can be done for the wrong motives: *to win the attention of men*.

The person who is real is not a play-actor!

The person who is real does not spend his or her time just seeking out others' attention.

He or she does whatever is asked of them with a healthy self-forgetfulness, in a healthily self-effacing way.

The concern of persons who are real is not themselves alone, their self-image.

They do not spend their lives as if looking in a mirror to check how they are coming across before others, as if always on stage, on show. They are not overly concerned, not to say completely obsessed, with what others are thinking and saying about them.

No.

Their concern of *real* people is to please God.

Their concern is to live under the Lord's regard.

The words of a French hymn writer get it when they speak of our vocation in these terms: *plaire à Dieu seul et vivre sous son regard: to please God alone and to live under His regard*. The call is to be pleasing in God's sight!

What Lent should see us strive to do is please God and live under His regard.

Our Lenten practices should neither be for attracting others' attention to us or just giving ourselves self-satisfaction as we look into the mirror. Spiritual narcissism should be avoided at all costs! It is the worst sort! The big difference between God and us is that God does not spend His time looking at Himself! Called to be *like God* we must learn to be less self-obsessed!

If Pope Francis can say that it is an unhealthy Church that is perpetually self-referential, an unhealthy Church that is self-obsessed, turned only inwards ... then, we can say that if any of us is exclusively self-referential, self-obsessed, turned only inwards, we have become very unhealthy and lost our way on the spiritual journey, even though we may imagine ourselves to be engaged and even well advanced upon it. I have seen it happen all too often (even in monasteries) and the results are lamentably sad. Spiritual narcissism leads to that worst of delusions. Spiritual narcissists will often so self-inflated that they will imagine themselves to be spiritual giants and regard those around them to be spiritual midgets.

Those who are puffed up with such delusions of spiritual pride are removed from the gospel's way of thinking!

Certainly, they are far removed from the ideal proposed by Benedict in his Rule for Monks. For Benedict, the true monk/the humble monk (hear there: the true and humble Christian) sees him or her self in the shoes of the publican who would not dare to raise his eyes to heaven and could only pray: *Lord be merciful to me a sinner.*

St Benedict in his Rule for Monks makes another important point very strongly and he does so over and over again, but especially forcefully in his Chapter *On the Observance of Lent*. It is this: the monk (hear there: any/very Christian) is to shun completely that innate tendency we all have to want to be independent operators, thinking that we alone know best what is good for us, without making any reference to or seeking out verification by a *vis a vis*.

Just think of what Benedict says about the monk needing to be confirmed (or being open to be corrected) when he submits to his abbot what he proposes to undertake personally during Lent. Benedict insists that the monk is not to take on anything without this reference to the abbot.

We all need to refer to another. We cannot satisfy ourselves to be purely self-referential operators.

What I am saying here presents a real challenge to many who are marked by a self-referential approach to life in what is an increasingly individualistic world.

As we engage ourselves on our Lenten journey, the call addressed to us is a call to think of Lent's end: *holy Easter ... life with/life in God!*

There will be things in all our lives that we need to die to if we are to attain that end.

Not least we will have to learn to die to our self-obsession!

But this death will lead to life: a fuller, better life!

May this Lent see us given the courage and strength we need to live whatever deaths to our false self are required of us in order to arrive at the point where we share in the true life God offers us in and through Christ-Jesus!

Amen!