

Your Best Lent Ever! - Part 1

The goal of Lent is initial and ongoing conversion (purification and enlightenment). It is a personal change and awakening with God. Lent is a worldwide God intervention for all peoples. We are being called to greater holiness and illumination from God. Whether Catholic or not, Lent is for everyone. The hope is that during Lent we will move from the superficial to the supernatural in an intense way.

Lent is a season when people come to church who ordinarily don't. Churches of many different denominations also experience larger than normal crowds during Lent. Everyone wants to make a good Lent. Even those who do not normally attend Mass come out of the woodwork because they want to receive ashes and affirm their identity as Catholics. Some will leave their ashes on at work, during school, and for the rest of the day.

Ashes come from the palms from Palm Sunday. Many leave their ashes on as an indication to others of their faith and as a sign to themselves of a new commitment to change and a renewed dedication to God. Ashes in the Bible are a symbol of our mortality as well as repentance. Ashes placed on one's head are a sign of sorrow because of sins committed.

The Ash Wednesday action and words say a lot about Lent. First, Lent confronts us with our own mortality. "Teach us to number our days that we may gain wisdom of heart." (Psalm 90:12). Remembering that we are dust and to dust we shall return can help motivate us to change. Lent is a sober season preparing us for our end. Society today does not want to look at death, but the church community looks it square in the face and allows it to teach us. Because we are mortal, we must get in touch with our finitude. Lent helps us confront this truth and prepare for our death. Lent is a season of preparation for Easter, yes, but also for our own end.

We also hear about repentance and belief. We are encouraged to really believe in what the Gospel (Good News) proclaims and adjust our lives accordingly. Self-examination and looking within are essential during Lent. Is there anything blocking my relationship with God? Where do I need to change? Lent is an opportunity to make adjustments and motivates us to get things right. It is a season of conversion, it is the acceptable time to make a move.

When the minister places the ashes on your forehead, he or she traces the sign of the cross. The cross is a symbol of self-denial and suffering. Jesus taught: "Take up your cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23). It is also an indication of grace. We are forgiven, justified, and saved by the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. Along with proclaiming our need for change, we are demonstrating that Lent is a season of grace. In the first preface for Lent at a Catholic Mass we hear:

"For by your gracious gift each year...we may be led to the fullness of grace..." (Preface of Lent I). This liturgical text is telling us that Lent is about grace. Lent is a gift from God to us. When we embrace it fully, we can experience initial as well as ongoing conversion.

Resolution or Revolution?

Most approach Lent as they do a new year. People come forward with great determination and make resolutions. While this is understandable, to have lasting change, we need more than resolution – we need revolution! Willpower is required, but it must be a Spirit inspired willpower. The same Spirit that led (thrust) Jesus into the desert the first Sunday of Lent is the same Spirit who will sanctify (empower) us to become holy. We must succumb and yield to the Spirit of God if there is to be the revolutionizing change that Lent calls us to.

On Ash Wednesday, the first reading from Joel proclaims "Rend your hearts, not your garments!" (Joel 2:13). This text tells us the change God wants is interior and not just external. Our hearts are rent ("rent" here, is the past tense of "rend," which means "tear apart." So in a sentence it means "he tore apart his heart," in a figurative sense) when we are serious, sorry and heartfelt about changing. For this internal change in our thinking, imagining, and deciding to occur, we need help.

Grace (Grace, in Christian theology, the spontaneous, unmerited gift of the divine favour in the salvation of sinners, and the divine influence operating in individuals for their regeneration and sanctification.) is necessary in our religion. If we want to improve and move forward, we need grace. Grace is the power of God at work in us motivating us and helping us to change. Through grace we stick with it and don't falter. Even if we do fall, we get back up and keep trying. Unlike a New Year's Eve resolution when after a while we give up, through grace, Lent provides us with an opportunity in the context of our life's pilgrimage to grow in character.

Inexplicable Grace

Grace is a gift, the favor of yet another chance. Time and time again, God demonstrates patience and deals generously with sinners. This truth is emphasized by Peter when he says: "Count the patience of our Lord as salvation." (2 Peter 3:15). In other words, see the time you have now as God being patient with you. Many interpret the time we are giving through God's patience as "there is no God." They misconstrue God's mercy instead as his nonexistence. God's silence and patience do not mean God is absent; rather, his silence means God is being lenient so we will change. This truth about God is continuously revealed throughout the Bible. Lent is a gift from God to you in order to turn from sin and grow in virtue. It is, as we hear on Ash Wednesday, "the acceptable time." (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Along with the gift of time, grace brings about a willingness to change. All too often we are self-absorbed and hardhearted. We don't even know where we need to change, much less do the work required to bring about such movement forward. Grace is operative when we begin to examine ourselves and identify areas where we need to pay attention. Grace helps us to humble ourselves when we admit our character flaws and then have the contrition to really make a move.

Grace begins on basic levels. For example, in order to believe, we need grace. The simple willingness to believe in God is grace at work. Paul makes it abundantly clear that faith isn't something we initiate; rather, it is a gift from God. Belief starts as a tiny mustard seed, an inner decision. It grows from there to an encounter with God. One's willingness to believe in God and embrace personal change is the footprint of grace.

Grace is also at work when we honestly identify the areas where we need to change. This is difficult for many to do. We are not always adapt at looking within. Many are in denial regarding the issues. There may be several areas where we need to change, but most have one main "Achilles heel" that needs to be addressed.

It is through the Holy Spirit who works within us that helps us to admit to our own shortcomings. This self-acknowledgment, is the first step in overcoming our various issues that need to be addressed in order to make the necessary changes in our lives. God always works in mysterious ways and has our best interest in mind.

Grace is also the ability to turn away from identified sin and stay pure. In order to overcome the impulses of concupiscence (strong sexual desire,; lust) or achieve sobriety despite any addiction, we require power over and above ourselves. This is a truth we must all learn. We cannot change by mere determination and self-will alone. We need the help of God.

The key to sobriety, as well as holiness, is admitting we are powerless and that God alone has the power to help us. This power flows through belief in God. Never underestimate Almighty God's power to work in you and through you. Look around and observe the universe. Notice that there are 8 billion people on the face of the earth. See how intricately and marvelously we are made. God has done and continues to do marvelous deeds! God is the one who created the cosmos and you and me. If God can do such mighty works in creation, God can help us!

God works through our belief. Our faith in God opens a door for God to work. We are saved by grace through faith. If you believe you can change and/or come to recovery, you will. If you believe you can overcome a sin, a bad habit, or addiction, you can, through God's help. Believing opens the door for God to work. God works through your faith, but what trips up many people is thinking: "I don't feel God. Nothing is happening." You don't always feel the power, but that doesn't mean God isn't at work. Power is stealthy but real. Don't rely on feelings – rely on faith, and you will experience growth.

Be assured grace is at work in the opportunity of Lent as we look within, identify our issues, and experience the power of God to change. Realize that Lent is a season. Lent is a marathon not a sprint. Different issues will emerge as you journey forward. Start with your one main issue now, and as you pilgrimage through the days of Lent, God will guide you into areas you may need to look at. Besides personal change, we all need a more intense relationship with God. Seek a deeper God awakening.

Lenten Lessons:

- Revolution, not resolution
- Be honest and look within
- Grace is God at work in you
- Believe and receive

Lenten Actions:

- Invite God's free grace into your life now
- Look within: What one main area needs to change?

