

ASH WEDNESDAY 2021

a simple three-part resource for use in prayer alone or with others.

Use only the bits that you find helpful for you.

PART ONE

- Begin by setting some time to be still and silent, perhaps alone, perhaps with others in your small community of family or friends.
- Be aware of your breathing, allowing it to deepen, perhaps with a few deep breaths to begin.
- Remember that you are in the presence of Jesus who is God-with-you here and now in the reality of your life. Become aware of the reality of your life today. What is going well for you? What is more challenging? What are your anxieties? What are your hopes?
- What miracle do you need / want Jesus to work in your life this Lent?
- As we begin Lent, a word from Pope Francis in his homily for Ash Wednesday last year:

“Lent is not a time for useless sermons, but for recognizing that our lowly selves are loved by God. It is a time of grace, a time for letting God gaze upon us with love and in this way change our lives”.

- As he led the world in prayer twelve months ago as the COVID pandemic began to take hold of the world Pope Francis referred to the virus as a “storm”. Let these words prepare us for this Lenten season of preparation for Easter:

“The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our pre-packaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people’s souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly “save” us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity. In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters.” Pope Francis, reflecting on the Covid Pandemic, 27 March 2020

PART TWO

If we were at Mass for Ash Wednesday, these are the readings we would have heard. Invite Jesus to speak to you, and expect Jesus to speak to you, as you now slowly read these scriptures.

First Reading: Joel 2:12-18

Let your hearts be broken, not your garments torn. ‘Now, now – it is the Lord who speaks – come back to me with all your heart, fasting, weeping, mourning.’ Let your hearts be broken, not your garments torn, turn to the Lord your God again, for he is all tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in graciousness, and ready to relent. Who knows if he will not turn again, will not relent, will not leave a blessing as he passes, oblation and libation for the Lord your God? Sound the trumpet in Zion! Order a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly, call the people together, summon the community, assemble the elders, gather the children, even the infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his bedroom and the bride her alcove. Between vestibule and altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, lament. Let them say, ‘Spare your people, Lord! Do not make you heritage a thing of shame, a byword for the nations. Why should it be said among the nations, “Where is their God?”’ Then the Lord, jealous on behalf of his land, took pity on his people.

Psalm 51

Have Mercy on me, O God, in Your kindness

Have mercy on me, O God, in Your kindness.
In Your compassion, blot out my offense.
Wash me, O God, from the stain of my guilt
and cleanse me from my sin.

My offenses, truly I know them.
My sin is always before me.
Against You alone have I sinned.
What is evil in Your sight, I have done.

Create in me a pure heart.
Put a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from Your presence
nor deprive me of Your spirit.

Defend me, O God, my Saviour.
My tongue shall sing out Your goodness.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth shall proclaim Your praise

Second Reading 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2

We are ambassadors for Christ; it is as though God were appealing through us, and the appeal that we make in Christ's name is: be reconciled to God. For our sake God made the sinless one into sin, so that in him we might become the goodness of God. As his fellow workers, we beg you once again not to neglect the grace of God that you have received. For he says: At the favourable time, I have listened to you; on the day of salvation I came to your help. Well, now is the favourable time; this is the day of salvation.

Gospel: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Jesus said to his disciples: 'Be careful not to parade your good deeds before people to attract their notice; by doing this you will lose all reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give alms, do not have it trumpeted before you; this is what the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win men's admiration. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you give alms, your left hand must not know what your right is doing; your almsgiving must be secret, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you. 'And when you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites: they love to say their prayers standing up in the synagogues and at the street corners for people to see them; I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you pray, go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you. 'When you fast do not put on a gloomy look as the hypocrites do: they pull long faces to let people know they are fasting. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that no one will know you are fasting except your Father who sees all that is done in secret; and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.'

PART THREE

- If you have made it this far, you are ready for the best part. There are a lot of words there in part one and two, but for us as disciples of Jesus the words on a page, the text of the scriptures, or the inspired words of a good person are there to guide us to a personal encounter and relationship with THE word who is a person, Jesus Christ who is God living with you here and now.

- Be still and silent once again and let Jesus speak to you. Perhaps Jesus will lead you back to a word or a phrase from the first two sections. Or your mind might be filled with all the stuff that is going on in your life. It does not matter since in these moments you are giving Jesus the time, the opportunity and the invitation to work in your life without the interruption of your own organised thoughts and project planning. Be still and silent. Trust that Jesus is working with you and in you at a level that may be deeper than your awareness. Relax. Breathe.
- The word “LENT” comes from the Old English word meaning “springtime” or lengthening of days. It is more difficult to connect Lent with spring here in the southern hemisphere when autumn is in the air. Lent is not simply another program for growth and self-improvement. It is a time of growth and new beginnings in your relationship with Jesus Christ.
- Make a decision now to spend some time every day of Lent in stillness and silence, listening to Jesus, speaking to him, letting Jesus remind you that you are not alone. Know that all your stress and worry in life threatens to overwhelm only when we forget that we are created and loved by Jesus who is God-with-us.

We’ll give the last word to Pope Francis:

*“In the first place is **prayer**, an expression of openness and trust in the Lord: it is the personal encounter with him, which shortens the distances created by sin. Praying means saying: “I am not self-sufficient, I need You, You are my life and my salvation”. In the second place is **charity**, in order to overcome our lack of involvement with regard to others. True love, in fact, is not an outward act, it is not giving something in a paternalistic way in order to assuage the conscience, but to accept those who are in need of our time, our friendship, our help. It means living to serve, overcoming the*

temptation to satisfy ourselves. In the third place is fasting, penance, in order to free ourselves from dependencies regarding what is passing, and to train ourselves to be more sensitive and merciful. It is an invitation to simplicity and to sharing: to take something from our table and from our assets in order to once again find the true benefit of freedom. “Return to me” — says the Lord — “return with all your heart”: not only with a few outward deeds, but from the depths of ourselves.”

Pope Francis Ash Wednesday 2016