

Homily to Begin Lenten Season on Ash Wednesday

What we begin today in our pilgrimage through Lent is, as the word of God so beautifully reminds us, multifaceted. What the headlines and TV news of the past week tells us is how even world events are multifaceted.

We simply have to be touched by the news from Mozambique. The pictures of the people rescued from treetops by helicopters, the accounts of those missing, the suddenness of the onslaught of the floodwaters, this is the stuff of tragedy. Malaria, cholera, hunger, thousands cramped together in makeshift camps: this is the stuff of suffering today and tomorrow and for some time to come. We are far away, but our hearts have to be with those who suffer. Please help through the offerings next Sunday here and in your own parishes for transmittal through Catholic Relief Services to meet the most urgent of the needs.

Some years ago I began to learn about Mozambique and what the Catholic Church means for that land in southern Africa. It is a country originally colonized and evangelized from Portugal but many years ago turned over to clergy native to the land. For many years, through the seventies and eighties, civil war fomented by other nations divided the country. Eight years ago (in 1992) Archbishop Goncalves, who visited me here in Baltimore, with the S. Egidio community in Rome, negotiated a peace settlement that has now held for almost a decade. As a result, the country was beginning to prosper. Then came the flooding. Now must come the help of our assistance and our prayers.

The prophet Joel speaks to us of the public side of repentance. Together we must show that we know the evil of being off course with God. Together we should show our determination to walk another way. We do not need the blare of a trumpet, but we do need the reality of penance, of a form of fasting to show that truly we are embarked on a new way.

The Apostle Paul underscores the role of one who must speak in the name of Jesus to say that we must move forward in being reconciled with God and with one another.

Normally, this does not happen in isolation. For those who follow Jesus, there is the knowledge that he expected some to speak in his name and to lead us along the way.

Jesus himself in the gospel of this day tells us of another, private dimension of the three aspects of our following of him: quiet privacy, with the link directly between the individual and God. Thus we pray in secret as well as together, thus we do our almsgiving quietly, not looking for public notice, as well as recognize a public side to it, using envelopes, participating in drives and appeals as communities, thus we disguise our fasting, which is genuine penance nonetheless. All these kinds of actions have their public side as well: in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus urged some public doing of good, so that others might praise the Father in heaven. The motivation is to be seen first by God. God can read the heart and reward the good intention, the high motivation.

And so we begin our Lenten pilgrimage. In this Eucharist may Jesus give us the courage to take the message of the ashes to heart. May he help us to see in the gift of his living Self in Holy Communion nourishment to walk in our Lenten resolutions and at the same time as a preparation to meet him who is the Lord of history, our brother and Redeemer.