

Homily for Ash Wednesday

You have heard it said, “conjunction junction, what’s your function”, but I say to you: “compunction punction, what’s your function”!

The season of Lent, which we begin today, is first of all about compunction. Compunction means remorse, or sorrow for our sins. Compunction is related to the word “puncture”. And just like a tire punctured by a nail deflates, so Lent is meant to help us deflate our often-inflated egos.

It’s not a news flash – but, we are prone to selfishness – of putting self, first. And so on this Ash Wednesday, we are forced to recall the truth of the matter: that we are dust, created from the earth. And it’s to dust that we shall return again one day. Given this truth of the matter, we recognize and own that we are truly and verily sinners. This earth is a very dusty place – and we are part of it – with all manner and type of sin that calls to us in one way or another.

If this were to all end here, it would be a very sad story indeed. But, Lent is not only about having a healthy sense of guilt when it comes to our sins. The second, and absolutely necessary part of this season, then reminds us sinners that we have a Savior – a Messiah, who came to suffer and die for us. We are reminded that although we are formed out of the dust of the earth, we are also redeemed as children of God – that we have souls of eternal worth and value – held in God’s tender esteem.

And because of this great love and mercy that our God has for us, He sent us His only-begotten Son, who has blazed the pathway back to Him and has opened the gates of heaven for us. To follow Jesus as His disciples, then, is our calling. To take up our crosses daily and follow Him is His command. But, how often do we not take up our crosses? How often do we prefer the easier way? How often do we place comfort over discipleship. Therefore, Lent is meant to pierce our hearts with a healthy sense of sin, so that it leads to a desire to turn from that sin. We call this conversion.

Conversion literally means “turning” – in this case, turning away from sin, and turning back towards God. Prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and our daily Lenten sacrifices – these are all meant to take that sorrowful recognition of our sins, and do something positive with it. These Lenten practices are meant to help us actually *do* the turning. As one of my favorite hymns, *Simple Gifts* goes: “To turn, turn will be our delight, till by turning, turning we come 'round right”. It’s in this process of turning, or conversion, that we see our Jesus; that we increase our desire to be more like Him; and that we are truly provided the graces that we need to do so. For again, we are formed out of the dust of the ground – we are weak, and although our intentions may be good, our wills are feeble, and need to be strengthened by action. So, may this first day of the season of Lent be for you a turning process. And whether you need to make a turn of 180° or just 5°, may it truly bring you right with God. God bless you.