

Ash Wednesday, Feb.22, 2012

Psalm 51: 1-17

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. Lent is defined as the 40 days before Easter (not counting Sundays).

Lent is a time of repentance and reflection, a time for admitting our need for God's forgiveness and for turning away from our sins. Traditionally, it has been a time for trying to break bad habits and for starting new, good habits.

Those new, good habits should include the Christian practices of sacrifice, giving, and praying.

Jesus told us to sell all we that have and give the money to the poor, and then if we do that we will be perfect, as God is perfect.

Selling all we have would be a big sacrifice.

And then giving the money to the poor would help a lot of people!

Now, I am not expecting anyone to sell all they own, but consider making a true sacrifice, either of your money or your time or something you really enjoy, and giving to the poor.

I have heard of several ways to do this. One way is to drink nothing but water for the 40 days of Lent and give the money you save to a project that provides clean drinking water to people in developing countries.

Or you could fast for one or more meals and give the money you save to Metro San Diego or some other organization that feeds the hungry.

Choose a worthy cause and give to it, sacrificing something that you normally spend money on, or something that you want to buy.

Remember, Christ has told us to give the thirsty a cold drink of water and to give the hungry something to eat. We should take this command very seriously.

In addition to sacrifice and giving, the third habit is praying. Jesus taught us a lot about prayer, not only by direct instruction, but by the example of his life.

He often withdrew from the crowds to spend time in prayer.

We read about how often he did that throughout the gospels. He always went by himself, so we don't have too much of a record of what he did, exactly.

We don't know if he spoke out loud, or if he fell on his knees.

Did he stand with his hands raised, looking up to heaven?

What kinds of things did he say to God? What did God say back?

We don't know.

There were usually no witnesses.

One exception to that came in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before Jesus was crucified.

The Bible tells us that Jesus prayed for hours, until his sweat fell like drops of blood. He was in anguish, pleading with God---I don't want to go through this much suffering! Isn't there another way? Take this cup from me, he said, meaning the time of pain and agony that would lead to his death.

In the end, he was resigned to God's will.

"Not my will but yours, father."

"I will follow through on what I started---what we started."

And what this says to me is that when I pray I can take everything to God. I can be completely open and honest. I can put it all out there without holding anything back.

And what will happen is that it will become clear what God wants me to do, and then I can decide to do that ---- or

I can get up and walk away, stubborn and resistant to God's plan for me.

If I say “yes” to God, then God will give me the strength or the patience or the skill or whatever it is I need to do so that I can follow through on what I have been asked to do.

And if I say “no,” then I have pushed myself away from God, refusing his care and walking away from that relationship, at least for the moment.

In prayer, we may be asked to sacrifice and to give, but we may also receive a great gift from God! God, in mercy and grace, knows what we need and is willing to provide, even before we ask.

And prayer is not required for God to give us all good gifts, but it does create a time for us to realize that those gifts are from God, and it opens our hearts to receive what God wants to give us!

So how should we pray?

Jesus taught his disciples the prayer that we call the Lord's Prayer. It is short and simple. It is a prayer for ourselves, to be obedient and to be protected from evil, and for our needs to be met. It is a prayer for God's reign to come on earth. It begins and ends with praise to God.



Basic and honest, open and vulnerable to God. This is how we should pray. Not to preach what we think others need to hear, or to exclude anyone else from the presence of God. Just here's what I need to live a good, decent life. An acknowledgement that God has the power and the glory forever!

Some prayers are simple-----Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Or Help me, help me, help me!

Some prayers are expanded versions of those two, asking for help or saying thank you in very specific ways, with much detail.

Some prayers are for ourselves. Some are for people we love. Some are for a certain situation----for all people who suffer from the effects of violence or who are fighting cancer, and so on. Some are for the whole world----for all people everywhere or for the environment or for animals in danger, or for the leaders of the world.

There are so many ways to pray.

Lent is a time to start new, good habits. Whether you pray regularly already or not, all of us can pray more.

We can pray to be more like Jesus, more willing to sacrifice, more generous with our giving, and we can even pray to find more time to pray!

During this holy season of Lent, a time of prayer and penitence and committing ourselves once again to Christ, let us pray to walk more closely in his footsteps, to see others with the eyes of Christ, and to love others with the heart of Christ.

Let us pray to have the courage and the strength to make true sacrifices and to give so that others might know the love of Christ through our giving!

Let us spend more time in prayer so that our relationship with our Lord and Savior is stronger, deeper, and more sustaining for our souls.

Amen.