

The Rev. Daren J. Zehnle
St. Anthony of Padua Parish, Effingham, Illinois
24 February 2009

Ash Wednesday

Dear brothers and sisters,

As we enter into the sacred season of Lent, we are aware of the somber tone of these days, but we are also aware of the joyful tone of these days.

The sobriety of Lent is marked especially by the imposition of ashes, that profoundly simple rite that calls so many of us to the Lord each year. Although we do not enjoy it, something about this day seems absolutely necessary to us, and, indeed, it is.

The ashes, of course, are a sign of our frail humanity and a potent reminder that we will die, for as the Lord said to Adam: "you are dust and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). They remind us that death is the just reward for our sin (cf. Romans 6:23).

Our own mortality is not something we often like to consider, but consider it we must. The ashes remind us that the way we live is not trivial, it does matter; the ashes call us anew to be faithful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, that having died with him in Baptism we might live forever with in newness of life.

Throughout the ages the Lord called out to his people, "Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the LORD, your God, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him" (Deuteronomy 30:19). This, then, is the goal and purpose of Lent: to cling to ever more to the Lord, to the listen more intently to his voice, and to love with our fiber of our being.

We hear the words of the Lord echo in the depths of our souls: "Even now ... return to me with your whole heart" (Joel 2:12). It is this invitation that marks these days with joy, for it is in these words that we know what the prophet says is true: "For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment" (Joel 2:13).

It is this plea of the Lord that has brought us here today. It is an invitation for us to receive his mercy and to be healed by his love that we might share fully in the joyful glory of his resurrection.

Let us, then, use these ashes well. As they remind us of our sinfulness, they also remind us of the Lord's mercy. Let us all remember that we are dust. Let us all turn away from sin. Let us all choose life, Jesus Christ, and be conformed ever more closely to him. Amen.