

ASH WEDNESDAY 2018
HOMILY-SAINT JOSEPH PARISH
FATHER CRAIG LOONEY
JOEL 2.12 PSALM 51.10



The last time Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday occurred on the same day was in 1956...a concurrence that we will not see again until 2029.

There actually was a Saint Valentine...he was a 3rd century priest who caught the attention of the pagan Roman emperor for illegally and secretly marrying young Christian couples...so the men could not be drafted into the army.

Valentine was arrested and condemned to death. While he was in jail awaiting his execution...he healed his guard's daughter of blindness. On his way to his execution...Valentine passed a note to the young girl. It was signed "Your Valentine".

In the 14th Century...February 14th became associated with romantic love. The custom of exchanging flowers, candy and greeting cards originated in 18th Century England. And Hallmark...they began producing the familiar Valentine's Day cards in 1916.

There is a connection between the real Saint Valentine's Day...not the Hallmark one...and Ash Wednesday...both days concern matters of the heart and unconditional love for God and others.

The real Saint Valentine was moved with compassion to heal a young girl of blindness...and ignoring orders from the pagan emperor...gave hope for young newly-married couples. He did what his heart compelled him to do...he practiced selfless Christian love...and it cost him his life.

Eight hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Jonah went to Ninevah, the capital of the great kingdom of Assyria, and asked the people to turn away from sinful and

destructive behavior...he asked them to have a change of heart. Everyone from the King on down repented...they told God they were sorry and wanted to do better...and to show they were serious about change...they put on rough burlap clothes and covered themselves with dirt.

Lent is about..."fessing up"...admitting to ourselves...and to God...we haven't always done the things we should...we have done things we shouldn't have done. God wants to remove the guilt we feel for the bad things we have said or done...and as the Collect for Ash Wednesday says...he offers us perfect remission and forgiveness. It all begins with a change of heart.

The ashes placed on our foreheads in the shape of the cross...remind us of our own mortality...and our hope for what comes after. When we die our bodies will return to the earth from which God created them...but that is not the end of the story.

The ashes are in the shape of the cross to remind us that our deaths do not mean extinction. Christianity is about light and life...the light that is Jesus...the eternal life he bought for us with his death on the cross...and the cross is the focus of our Lenten Journey.

Lent should be for us a time of serious personal introspection and prayer. Lent should be for us a time of positive change in our lives. Lent helps prepare us for a more joyful celebration of Easter...without Lent...there can be no Easter...without Good Friday...there can be no resurrection.

Change...begins in the heart...and not just on Saint Valentine's Day or Ash Wednesday. A good place to start is to ask for God's help in the words of Psalm 51..."Create a pure heart in us, O God, and put a new and loyal spirit in us."

