

ASH WEDNESDAY 2021

HOMILY – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH

FATHER CRAIG LOONEY

JOEL 2.12-17 St. MATTHEW 6.16-21

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“Come back to the Lord your God. He is kind and patient, always ready to forgive and not punish.”

Compelling words from the prophecy of Joel written about 600 years before the birth of Jesus.

Little is known about Joel. His prophecy dates from the time of the Persian Empire. He prophesied in the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

It was Joel’s mission to call God’s people to repentance. But he wants the repentance to be genuine...he writes, “Let your broken heart show your sorrow tearing your clothes is not enough.”

Ash Wednesday is about more than words. Joel’s words were a call to action...a call to do something positive and productive...a call to change one’s bad behavior and come back to God.

The ashes on our foreheads are in the shape of the Cross. They remind us of our roots...we are made from dust and we will return to dust. But the ashes are for us a symbol of hope...because by the Cross, we are healed.

Jesus took the sins of the whole world on his shoulders to the Cross. With his death he defeated sin and its power over us. The Cross is our symbol of hope and redemption. We will return to the ashes we came from...but we don’t stay there. Jesus saved us from darkness and death.

Jonah prophesied in the Northern Kingdom of Israel about 200 years after Joel. He went to the people of Ninevah and convinced them to repent and turn back to God. They did and to show they were serious they put on clothes made from burlap and threw ashes on themselves.

Jesus tells us in the Gospel not to run around with sad faces...to wash our faces and comb our hair...so people won’t know we are fasting. For the ashes on our foreheads to mean something, we must make a deep personal commitment and reorient our spiritual lives from the inside out. The ashes are a call to action!

Lent is our opportunity to focus our eyes, hearts, and minds on the Cross. We will spend the next forty days walking with Jesus toward the Cross. And we will ask God to help us do the right things, and to stay away from the things that distract us and keep us from acting as we should.

Lent is a time to turn away from our sins and to return to God...as the prophet Joel wrote...and accept his loving invitation to repentance and restoration...which we will discover is the greatest blessing we will receive during Lent. We must then make a sincere effort to do better.

We can ask God in the words of Psalm 51 to make our hearts pure and to put a new and loyal spirit in us. Then we will truly have a blessed and productive Lent, and be ready for joyful Easter.

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