**St. Ambrose**

**Ash Wednesday**

**March 6, 2019**

**Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

*Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward s from your Father in heaven.*

*"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

I wonder if we were brought up with some of the same moral directives.  One I remember was to eat all the food on my plate because “think of all the starving people in China.”  The best retort I ever heard to that was: "Name one!"

Naming one individual in China who was starving may have made a difference; trying to imagine a faceless mass made little impact. There is something important about naming things - making them specific.  I've discovered that it's much easier to say, as a Christian, that I love all people, but a lot more difficult than to say I love the person who recently trashed me behind my back.

The general is often much easier than the specific.  Given the choice of donating to a cause such as homelessness, or engaging with a homeless person, I think many of us would choose the former – not because we’re uncaring people, but because it’s easier to deal with people whose faces we don’t see, than with a specific individual, and observe the lines in their faces and the weariness in their eyes!

Generalizing rather than being more specific can let us off the hook. It costs us little. Our hearts remain untouched; our minds remain unchanged.

Why I share these seemingly unrelated opening comments is because as soon as I read the opening collect for Ash Wednesday, I was struck by how it actually invites us into a very generalized way of thinking. We “worthily lament our sins” – what sins? We “acknowledge our wretchedness.” What wretchedness?

Is it possible that keeping whatever we understand to be our sins or our wretchedness rather non-specific and vague sets the tone for a rather uneventful and perhaps quite dull Lent – a season that leaves us untouched and unchanged.

Lent isn’t a dull season. It has the potential of being one of the most life-giving seasons of the liturgical year because its purpose is to wake us up. Not in the sense of a shrill alarm clock insisting that we get moving, get going and not stop until we collapse into bed that night. Not that kind of wake up.

Instead, a much more subtle, almost imperceptible wake up, that regardless of our circumstances – whether or not we rely on an alarm clock to get us out of bed in the morning, takes place - in the holiest of holy ways.

And how do we get there? We are reminded this morning we get there and experience a Holy Lent by self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word. Demanding stuff, especially, as I used to think, the self-denial bit, which I thought Lent was all about – giving up sugar in one’s coffee, or coffee altogether, or dessert. But it’s so much more than that. And ironically, although it is a demanding season, it’s by embracing any one or more of these activities that at the deepest levels, we begin to wake up.

Taking time out to be intentional, to be specific about those things we want to examine within ourselves, being specific about those parts of ourselves that drag us down – our negativity, our anger, our pettiness, our jealousy, our fear – whatever they are and praying to God to show us how to deal with them; being specific about when and what we are going to read during Lent, when and where we are going to meditate.

All these things, when we engage with them touch our hearts and change our minds. We, like Jesus, emerging from the wilderness, are filled with greater awareness of who we are - who God is in our lives, as well as the Holy Spirit living within us. We emerge feeling closer to Christ; we emerge far freer of those things that bind us. We get a taste of what it is like to be fully alive.

So, I encourage all of you to be still. Take a moment to reflect on how you want to approach Lent this year. Let the Holy Spirit guide you. Let’s spend a few minutes in silence right now to prepare ourselves

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.