

Smoky Mountain Reflections

Spring #2

Presidents, Civil rights pioneers, candy hearts, Love, Festivals.....

These are the things that most of us think of when we think of February. But there is a much more important date that can not precede February and rarely happens in March. It is not Mardi Gras, but if that is your guess then you are only one day off.

Ash Wednesday is the day that always follows Mardi gras or Fat Tuesday, the feast before the fast. This year (2010) Ash Wednesday will be on the 17th. It would be easy to focus our thoughts on George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, or Saint Valentine, or even the festivals and festivities that pervade most western Christian cultures prior to Ash Wednesday. But we should always have our focus centered on Christ, and the church along with traditional practice and observances which are associated with Ash Wednesday can be of great help in this endeavor.

On the Western Christian calendar, **Ash Wednesday** is the first day of Lent and occurs forty-six days (forty days not counting Sundays) before Easter. It is a moveable feast, falling on a different date each year because it is dependent on the date of Easter. It can occur as early as 4 February or as late as 10 March.

Ash Wednesday gets its name from the practice of placing ashes on the foreheads of the faithful as a sign of repentance. This comes from the biblical practice of putting ashes or dust on your head when you are grieving, mourning or have been emotionally wounded. The ashes used are the Palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday which are burned. It is our practice to combine these ashes with Oil. This paste is used by the pastor to make the sign of the cross, upon the forehead. He then recites the words: "thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return".

These traditions are meaningless if we do not attach them to biblical truth to give them meaning, and they can be seen as idolatry if Christ and the Gospel are not firmly communicated in these acts. So let's examine how these activities communicate Christ and the Gospel. First we can understand how ashes communicate death and grief, by combining them with oil which is biblically used for blessing, a cross is put on our foreheads the beginning of a time of reflection and fasting. We then go out with this mark showing that we are redeemed by Christ selfless act on the cross. This time of lent is for denying our selves and reflecting on the great price Christ paid on Good Friday. So that we begin focusing on the pain He suffered and the grief caused by Christ death on the cross, looking with anticipation to the great blessing of His resurrection.

This brings us to the question of fasting and how it is a part of this tradition. Ash Wednesday is the beginning of a time of prayer and fasting but how do we apply this tradition to our lives? This 40 day period is a reflection of the 40 days Christ fasted in the wilderness in preparation for his earthly ministry. The Sundays are not counted as they are seen as little Easter breaks in the fast. We as a society are not very good as saying no to ourselves and fasting is a powerful act of denying oneself. Fasting in the traditional sense means to deny oneself food or water or other pleasurable things. Let me precede what follows with a warning; No one should ever endanger their lives buy not taking in adequate nutrition or fluids.

That being said we can tap into the practice of fasting for physical and spiritual benefit. While the medical community confirms that regular fasting has physical benefits, I will focus on the spiritual benefits. Denying oneself food and drink can be done in a way that keeps one adequately nourished however remaining hungry. We can use these physical cravings to continually remind us that we are in the season of lent and can say a quick prayer, "Lord help me over come my desires and keep me mindful of the cost of you Grace!" There are however many personal desires that we can use today as a personal fast. Giving up something we regularly crave; a favorite food, sweets, a favorite beverage, a favorite form of entertainment, video games, TV, Golf, a favorite craft or hobby, anything that we regularly spend time or resources on ourselves. We can then take that time and those resources and give them to God, in more prayer, more scripture reading, or the funds we would have spent on food or entertainment being given to; church, missions, or some other ministry that serves others, therefore denying ourselves even the benefit of those things after the fast is over.

Two very important points to remember when we fast; First we do not fast to earn anything from God because we can not earn what Christ has fully paid for, our motives should always be Christ centered therefore

seeking his will not our own. Secondly should keep our fast to ourselves making no big deal of the fact that we are doing something to express our gratitude to God. In essence we do not what to put on a show of piety in order to receive a reward of honor and compassion from others.

So as you consider what you might give up during this coming Lenten season, remember to endeavor to do so this coming Ash Wednesday in as God pleasing a way possible.

Enjoy your celebration of Presidents birthdays, Civil rights pioneers, candy hearts, love and the festivities that precede Ash Wednesday, but keep central to you life He whose suffering and death Ash Wednesday exist to proclaim.

In Christ,
Pastor Portier