

Ash Wednesday homily

3/9/11

There was a professor in the seminary who taught a class on pastoral counseling. He said to us one day, “No one would give up what they know unless they believe there is something better for them.” He was speaking to us about addictions but he stressed to us this was generally applicable to all human behavior. “No one would give up what they know unless they believe there is something better for them.”

The discipline and asceticism of Lent is premised on the fundamental belief that God has something better for us. Repentance and conversion can only happen when we have a firm hope that what we believe will come. We repent because we believe the Good News is good for us.

This Lenten Season begins with a public act, the imposition of ashes, a public sign of conversion. Conversion is more than a turning away from sin. Conversion is a turn towards hope, hope in God’s mercy, a trust that God’s kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.

The imposition of ashes is also a very personal gesture. We make our hope personal. This personal act also makes our hope public. We personally become the sign and instrument of hope. We make hope happen.

There are lots of people looking for hope these days. Many people who have lost hope. There are people who want change. The lyrics of a popular song said it once, “we are waiting for the world to change.” St. Paul tells us, “Now is the acceptable time. ... Now is the day of salvation.”

Lent is not about waiting. It is about believing in the change God can bring in us and through us. Waiting for the world to change, as that popular song would suggest, is already a quiet, private act of despair. Today’s gesture is a public act of hope, believing in what God can do in us and what he can do through us.

There is the old familiar American hymn, “Amazing Grace.” This amazing grace is what we all need as we begin this Lent. It is what California needs. St. Paul told the Ephesians, God “is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us.” (Eph. 3.20) This power helps us imagine the ways we care for the weak as well as those in the womb. We can imagine putting our children in better classrooms and giving workers the chance to do their best. We can imagine a table big enough to feed everyone. There is a house big enough to give a home to everyone. There is a door wide enough to welcome everyone. We can still imagine all that can be accomplished together when we choose today to believe in the hope that God still has in us. He so loved the world that he sent his only Son, Jesus. This divine personal gesture made public his love for us. He has not given up on us nor should we give up on one another. So we each step forward today to repent from resignation and firmly embrace the belief in all the good that God can do.