

Grace, peace and mercy be unto you in the name of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Tonight, we begin Lent, the season of repentance and preparation for Holy Week. Forty days mean for us parallels with the 40-year pilgrimage in the desert of the people of Israel. Also, the 40 days of fasting of our Lord in the desert before His temptation by the devil.

In the Middle Ages in Europe, strict fasting was mandatory. So, the purpose of the Carnival parties was to clear the cupboards and pantries of meat, butter and any food and drink that would not keep for 40 days. The Lutheran Confessions teach that fasting in itself is not obligatory, nor forbidden by God, but the correct fast is the result of repentance ordained by God in the same way as correct prayer and the correct giving of alms; that fasting is useful for self-discipline; and that it is an excellent external training in preparation to receive the Lord's Supper.

In the Old Testament, God's people practiced fasting voluntarily or sometimes by command to express their repentance. The prophet Joel says, "Blow a trumpet in Zion, proclaim a fast, call a congregation." And not just the Israelites. In the book of Jonah, which you just heard from, the Lord sent the prophet to the city of Nineveh, to call the people of repentance before its destruction in 40 days.

"And the men of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed fasting, and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them. And the news reached the king of Nineveh, and he rose from his seat, and cast off his garment, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat on ashes."

Notice, to sit in ashes and cover your head with ashes were also signs of sadness and regret. At the time of Jesus, the custom of the

Jews was to fast twice a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays, to show repentance and humility. But the hypocrites made fasting another form of self-glorification, not only observing additional days of fasting, but also affecting a disfigured face, inviting sympathy and praise. They neglected the daily care of the face, to make the effect of fasting seem even more impressive. It was an empty show so that they could be perceived as more important figures and gain the reputation of greater holiness.

This is the proper method of fasting according to our Lord: "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face; not to be seen by men, but by your Father who sees in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you in public. "

A mere external demonstration of repentance without a change of heart does not correspond to following Jesus. It is the heart that must feel sadness and humility. Therefore, the usual daily wash and anointing should not be omitted. Jesus does not order his disciples to suspend acts of public piety, but to ensure that they are done for the glory of God.

The prophet Joel also wrote, "Therefore, now, says Jehovah: Turn to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and lamenting. Tear your heart, and not your garments; and make Jehovah your God; because He is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and great in mercy, and who repents of punishment."

In the same gospel according to Saint Matthew, chapter 5, verse 16, we find this: "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Pare which is in heaven."

Therefore, the imposition of ashes that I would normally be offering tonight is to confess our spiritual state before God, that we are

enslaved by sins and need our Lord Jesus. The sign of the cross on our foreheads reminds us that we are dust and we will return to dust, because of our sin, but also of the promise of eternal life that we have in baptism. And by this confession, we glorify God for the suffering and death of our Savior on the cross, who won for us justification by faith.

We plead in the words of Psalm 51, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your mercy; according to the multitude of your mercies, erase my rebellions. Wash me more and more of my evil, and cleanse me of my sin. Because I recognize my rebellions; And my sin is always before me. Against you, against you I have only sinned, and I have done evil in front of your eyes: That you may be recognized right in your word, and taken for granted in your judgment. Behold, in evil I have been formed, and in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, you love truth in the inmost; and in secret you have made me understand wisdom."

Repentance and all of which constitutes discipline at the time of Lent, helps us in our spiritual struggle and prepares us to celebrate with joy the Feast of the Resurrection. "The sacrifices of God are the broken spirit; You will not despise the contrite and humiliated heart, O God. "

Amen.