

RENDING OUR HEARTS

Dr. Fred Fourie ~Ash Wednesday, March 1, 2006

Joel 2: 12-17



Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; **rend your hearts and not your clothing.** Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. **Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?** Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep. Let them say, **"Spare your people, O LORD, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"**

Loved Ones, through the ages ~ the Lenten season is associated with fasting and doing without. Many people in our culture and across the world give up something that they enjoy for Lent — some eat no meat, others no chocolate, etc. *Our youngest son once offered to give up his schoolbooks – but his teacher was not amused!* There is certainly nothing wrong with any sincere effort to bring about positive change in our lives. However, these **so-called sacrifices** do not seem to bring about any real or lasting change.

Recently, a man walked into a police station to confess a crime he had committed fifteen years before. He also gave the reason for his confession! He wept and said, **"I have not been able to get it off my mind."** Here was a man willing to subject himself to punishment in order to restore his peace of mind. Many people are troubled and carry a **deep unrest inside**, without really knowing why. Many studies, in-depth investigations and research have identified this issue! It has everything to do with **unresolved guilt** in our lives.

Many, decent peace loving people are wrestling with our their very own restless minds; maybe the old hymn, Rock of Ages, says it best, **"Not** the labor of my hands, Can fulfill your law's **demands**; Could my zeal no respite **know**, Could my tears forever **flow**, All for sin could not **atone**; You must save, and you **alone**."

Our scripture reading said, *"Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing"*

Let us therefore bring our guilty, restless minds and sins and lay them before the throne of God. **What a gift that invitation is!** Some of us carry around SO many feelings of guilt. In the beauty of this sanctuary and the peace of this quiet time in God's presence, our faith assures us that God's invitation will never expire for us: "Come now, let us reason together," says the

LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. On this Ash Wednesday of 2006, we are here because we still believe in a loving and forgiving God. Lent is a time of repentance!

There is more good news! **Lent Is Also A Time Of Absolution.** Our Scripture reading invited, "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love . . ." to confess our sins and still keep beating up on ourselves does no good for us. This may be the main reason why so many people fail to truly repent and begin new lives. **They never experience the absolution of God.** An old Scottish clergyman once said that fooling ourselves has two different stages –both lies! Before we commit a sin, we think that one little sin does not matter—no one will know. The second lie is after we have sinned when we believe that we are stuck forever. He explained the meaning of forgiveness quite succinctly. "God wants you to fly. He wants you to fly free of yesterday's guilt. He wants you to fly free of today's fears. He wants you to fly free of tomorrow's graves of sin, fear, and death. God has moved these mountains. God will answer these prayers. God will grant that fruit. The Bible says that this is what God longs to do! God longs to set you free so you can fly again . . . free in the forgiving presence of God." Lent is not only a time of repentance; it is also a time of receiving and accepting God's assurance of forgiveness.

Lent is also a time of renewal and refreshment. It is a time of turning our burdens over to Christ and allowing him to carry them on our behalf. The Jewish painter Marc Chagall's painting of THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC, depicts Abraham as he is about to plunge the knife into the heart of his young son Isaac. In the painting, however, an angel has seized his hand and holds it. Off to the side of the altar a ram has been caught by its horns in the bushes. God provided a sacrifice to take the boy's place. Up in the corner of the painting there is another figure. It is Jesus carrying His cross to Golgotha. Chagall returned repeatedly to this theme.

If you and I have repented of our sins, we can experience the forgiveness of God! We can turn over the burdens of our hearts to Christ who is far better to bear them than we are. So, return to God this night. Lay your sins at God's altar. Experience God's absolution. Turn your burdens over to the Lord and begin a new life!

"Come now; rend your heart and not your clothing! Jesus said, "*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*"

AMEN

