

Today in clearest focus, front and center, is our confession of ourselves as sinners. We now cross the threshold and set off on the journey to Holy Week and Easter, and we enter it by considering what it is that necessitated our Lord to go to His cross: our sins. We will sing this truth again and again in six weeks' time:

*Whence come these sorrows, whence this mortal anguish?
It is my sins for which Thou, Lord, must languish...*

*I also and my sin wrought Your deep affliction;
This indeed the cause has been of Your crucifixion*

*Mine, mine was the transgression,
But Thine the deadly pain*

*I caused Your grief and sighing
By evils multiplying As countless as the sands.*

*Who struck the blow that killed our gracious Master?
"It was I," thy conscience cries, "I have wrought disaster!"*

That satisfaction has been made, the price paid, accepted as shown by Christ's resurrection from the dead. Yet in the words of Solomon in Proverbs, "**as the dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly.**" So since last Ash Wednesday, and the sober consideration of your sins, the terrible price it required of God's only beloved Son, the shedding of His holy, innocent blood, how many times have you returned to sin?

If you made a tally of all the times since last Ash Wednesday that you recognize you violated the holy Law of God, every biting criticism designed to hurt, every time you judged someone as though you were above all correction, every careless or foul word, every fostering and delight in lust, every occasion of overeating, of drinking to excess, every time you said in not in actual words then by what you did, "I'm too busy to read the Word of God," "I'm too tired to get up and go to church," every time you acted as though there were no God at all and you mattered the most. What would your tally be?

From time to time I hear the joke when someone comes back to church after a long absence, they sometimes say something along the lines of "I hope the walls don't fall in." As much as that's an effort at humor, there is a truthful recognition in that. The awareness not just of it's been a while, much longer than it should have been, but the muck and mire of our lives bring an acute sensitivity to wondering, "Is this the place for me?" And it is not just those who have not come to church for a while, but many a Christian, clearly and painfully aware of his sins, remembering some terrible deed she has done, or waging an ongoing battle against temptation and often falling, feels that this is not the place for him, that she does not belong here.

By right of divine justice the soul that sins shall die. It's right there in the Bible, Ezekiel 18:20. God says it. As we heard in the words that accompany the ashes, as we will hear again this Sunday, because of our

sin we return to the dust from whence we came. Not only that, not simply bodily death, what terrifies and troubles us so much, what we fear to such a degree we spend most of our lives ignoring and denying it. But even more so, eternal punishment. Not simply to be driven out of the church building, but driven out of the Lord's heavenly mansions, the door shut, the gate locked.

But this is where the church delivers to us a truth just as powerful and moving as the stark acknowledgement of our sins, and it goes far deeper than the surface of our skin. For the remembrance of the just sentence we deserve is given a healing balm for every troubled conscience. You, the sinner, come here because this is what God desires the sinner to do in his terror and shame.

Until the Old Testament reading, the Ash Wednesday service starts off with our prayers, our pleas for mercy and forgiveness. The first time we hear from God, where He speaks His words to us, He says, **"Yet even now, return to Me....Return to the LORD, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love; and He relents over disaster."** The Lord bids His sinful people come to Him, and He provides instruction, gives direction, for what to do, how the sinner might approach Him. It's for everyone, for every sinner, just as the ashes were given to all, regardless of age, so God would gather all the people, **"the elders...the children, even nursing infants,"** for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Before them, between the altar and the entry into the temple, the priest was to stand and plead the Lord to spare His people. What the Lord then pledges to send forth to them is not wrath, not judgment, not scorn, but blessing. Grain, wine, and oil, satisfaction, and no shame before the world.

That picture described by God, of what His priest is to do for His people, where that is done and what comes of it, is what we call a type. It is a picture that points forward to something to come. And what the liturgy today does so beautifully, not just as a brilliant literary move, but to teach and comfort you with the good news of what our God has done is the Epistle reading, where we are given the antitype, the real thing of which the type is but the mirror image. St. John tells us **"the blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin. . . . He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. . . . we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."**

There ever remains an advocate, a defender, a go-between. He is the faithful one. He is the just, the righteous one. He is the one who has done all that was required and demanded. He is the propitiation for our sins, has borne the punishment for them. That's what that word means. He has made satisfaction, payment. And so He is able to forgive sins, to cleanse from injustice and unrighteousness.

He is the Priest, the intercessor, the go-between, our Advocate. He stands between the altar of His cross, and before the Father's throne, and where your sins would demand just punishment, your Savior Jesus stands and points to His cross, holds up His pierced and glorified hands from which His blood poured, saying, **"Spare Your people, O LORD."** And from the Father's gracious heart, through and for the sake of our Lord's Passion, come not our just desserts, but every blessing: forgiveness of our sins, cleansing from every stain of guilt and shame. Today, as Christians, we receive the grain and wine and oil that the prophet Joel speaks of.

The ashes on your forehead were mixed with oil. Practically, that makes the ashes better hold the shape of the cross, the symbol that reminds us of the source of every blessing, above all the defeat of death. Oil itself carries heavy biblical significance. It's the Neosporin of the ancient world, it promoted healing. By

Christ's wounds we are healed, we who are sentenced to be laid in the dust of the death have the promise by His cross and resurrection that death cannot hold us, we, our sins atoned for, will be raised up, healed eternally.

Even more, by God's own plan and command, we receive the grain and wine brought forth and prepared, given back to us as the gift of that very body and blood. The blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin.

As much as we must recognize the problem, we must confess the diagnosis, speak it aloud, and Lent teaches us to do this, we are also taught by this holy season to see the One who bears our sin for us, who delights in receiving sinners to Himself, to assure them of what He has done for them, and to give them peace in His holy wounds.