

Today we mark the beginning of a new season in our relationship with God. We begin this new season by burning the palms that marked the end of the last season of Lent; from the last Palm Sunday. Does the burning mean that a year of holy relationship has gone up in smoke? No. That year has not simply vanished. We have the dust, the physical living dust from the year that has passed to remind us of how that year played out for us; a year of actions taken, prayers offered, sins that were forgiven, grace that was bestowed; a year that was fully lived - with some of it, maybe even much of it, lived on behalf of God's kingdom.

Today we have the opportunity to mark an intentional turning and re-turning to God knowing that God will again and again, each time we turn to him, create in us clean hearts. How do we do that? Metaphorically, that process is as simple as turning to a new page; one that has not yet been written on. But practically, that process requires some discipline. We know, because we have lived this before, that deepening a relationship takes patience, time and focus. We know that there are a million ways to get distracted from the process; a million ways to be taken off course. How many of us have started a new discipline of daily prayer during Lent only to find that block of time very soon taken up by an extra hour of sleep? Or maybe we've given up something that we know we shouldn't do so much of, like maybe social media, only to return to it as soon as Lent is over... maybe even sooner.

As the reading from the gospel for today suggests, this turning to God is not meant to be a performance. It is not meant to be something that we show to the world to gain approval or applause. This act of turning to God is meant to be something that changes us; changes something deep inside us. Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be *seen by them*; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

So what about receiving the mark of the cross on our foreheads? Isn't that practicing our piety before others? Well, it IS, if that is our intention. Is our intention is to go out into the world after this worship service in order to make an impression on others that we are surely more

religious, more blessed, more loved by God? I don't think that is why we are here today. I believe that we believe Jesus, that the only audience that matters for us is an audience made up of our one God. I believe that the ashes imposed on our foreheads allow us to see ourselves as we really are. When we look at ourselves in the mirror, we can see that we are the embodiment of our life lived; our actions taken; our love shared; our prayers, fasting and alms giving are represented in that cross of ashes.

As we go about our day, we might notice other people who bear ashen crosses on their foreheads. How might we react when we see them? Will we notice that their cross represents their life lived for God's kingdom? Or will we just see a smudge that needs to be washed clean? I believe that in many ways, this mark is like the way early followers of Christ identified each other as Christians. One person would draw a semi-circle in the dust. If someone came along and drew another semi-circle to complete the shape of a fish, those two people knew they shared faith in Christ. Nothing else needed to be said. It was a heart to heart knowing, a shared feeling of belonging - one to the other.

Might this be the way God's kingdom will grow in our midst? Not with trumpets, loud and false prayers and empty, dismal displays of fasting but instead with silent, prayerful acknowledgement of the presence of God in our midst through each other. The way we interact with our fellow human beings in our short time on this planet serves to strengthen or weaken our relationship with God. That relationship is our treasure in heaven. This Lent, let us add to our treasure in heaven by intentionally growing in relationship with our God and with each other.