

Many years ago, someone I know made a point on Ash Wednesday to get up early, go to Mass, and get ashes before he went to work.

He worked in a big city, at a large corporation, with a very culturally diverse group of employees.

One of his fellow employees, a Sikh, probably from India, who every day at work wore a turban ... and had a long flowing beard ... both of which are aspects of his religious practice and tradition ... saw him walking down the hall, stopped him, and said, "Excuse me, but you have dirt on your head."

Thinking this was a "teachable moment," this man explained the meaning of Lent ... hoping to share a moment of inter-religious dialog ... at which point his turban-wearing, bearded co-worker stated: "You people really need to get with the times."

In the Scripture for today, we hear about "getting with the times." The prophet Joel tells us that "now" is the time for us to "*return to [God] with our whole heart.*"

St. Paul reminds us "*on behalf of Christ, [to] be reconciled to God,*" and the "*now is a very acceptable time*".

Lent is 40 days of self-denial. We abstain from meat on Fridays ... and we fast on Ash Wednesday and on Good Friday - eating only one significant meal, with two smaller meals to get us through the day. Certainly not bread and water ... or only water. And only for those aged 18-59 are obliged to fast; while all Catholics over the age of 14 are obliged to abstain from meat.

Why do we do this? Especially in our contemporary society where every need is fulfilled in a few minutes. We have 24 hour stores and restaurants. 100s of cable channels available at our fingertips. Not only can we find and buy just about anything on the planet at the click of a button, but supposedly it will all soon be delivered to our doorsteps by automated drone.

We give up things ... we give away things ... in order to make room for God.

In the Gospel, we hear Jesus giving us the three-part "recipe" for Lent - prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

How do these three things help us make room for God?

Prayer is the easy answer. You can't get to know Someone unless you talk to Them. And aside from talking, if we want a conversation, it always helps to listen. God speaks to us in Scripture, in the silent moments of prayer that

we take in His Presence, and through the events of our lives. Are we listening? Are we on speaking terms with Him? Lent is a good time to patch up ... or deepen our relationship with God.

It doesn't have to be a plethora of Rosaries or the Stations of the Cross on our knees. If you can't manage that sort of a commitment, why not just tell God you love Him throughout the day?

Fasting - going without something that we are used to having ... in the legal sense, we go without a lot of food on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. On Fridays we abstain from meat and either go vegetarian that day, or else eat fish or seafood. By giving up these things - things that we take for granted ... we can begin to empty ourselves of externals and focus on what is inside. If we give up certain foods ... we can shift that physical hunger to a more eternal focus ... and see that we should be hungering for God.

Again, we don't need to starve ourselves into sickness ... not that many of us are starving. But by turning down something that we might crave ... a stale Packzi perhaps ... or even recognizing in that moment of craving, how our lives ... how our world ... would be transformed if we had just a bit more of a craving for God's presence.

And finally, almsgiving. Traditionally this meant that whatever you saved by not eating certain things during Lent, or perhaps through your prayerful reflection on God's generosity in your life ... we contribute to the poor and needy. Oftentimes its through other agencies that we do this. But maybe we should look to do more random acts of monetary kindness. Put a quarter in somebody else's parking meter, or put an extra buck in the Sunday collection. But the best kind of almsgiving are those done person-to-person. In this way, our generosity can reflect the generosity of God who has given us all that we have.

In a few moments, we are all going to have the chance to receive ashes. We're all going to leave church today "with dirt on our heads." And then we will continue with the liturgy as usual.

As we approach this altar to receive the Sacred Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, let us "get with the times" ... so that as we begin Lent, we might "*even now ... return to [God] with [our] whole heart*" ... so that we might better realize that "*now is a very acceptable time ... now is the day of salvation.*"