

Dear Friends,

“Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God.” Joel 2:12-13a

We begin the season of Lent this Wednesday with the words of the prophet Joel calling us to repentance, Return with All Your Heart to the Lord God.

Lent is the season of the Church year when we are invited to look deeply within ourselves and ask how well our hearts are centered on living our identity as God’s people. In the Gospel for Ash Wednesday Jesus challenges us to be very specific in naming those obstacles in our hearts that block us from reflecting our truest identity.

It is no coincidence that Ash Wednesday and Joel’s words on behalf of the Lord are spoken to us on Valentine’s Day, a day centered on the one to whom our hearts belong. God is our true love, our first love. To him do our hearts belong. Sometimes, though, we have chosen to give our hearts to other gods, to gods whose charm opposes God’s. That is the reason for the choice of Joel’s words as the theme for our journey through Lent this year, Return with All Your Heart. It is also why on Ash Wednesday, after receiving ashes, everyone will be handed a small wooden heart, a symbol of our own individual hearts.

You will notice that the heart has a cross on one side and is blank on the other. As we prepare to receive ashes and begin our Lenten journey and as each of us receives one of the wooden hearts, prayerfully consider what in your heart opposes the pure, sacred heart of God as revealed by Christ. Then on the blank side of the heart, write that sin at odds with God and commit to asking God to return your heart to him, its rightful owner, also committing to carry the heart every day of Lent.

With the heart you will also receive a prayer card with a verse from Psalm 51 asking God – in the words of the psalmist: “A pure heart create for me, O God . . . give me again the joy of your help” (Psalm 51:12, 14). On Good Friday, as we venerate the cross of Christ we will give him our old hearts, anticipating the new heart that comes with his resurrection.

May this Lent bring about a true transformation in our hearts, in our lives.

Peace and blessings,

Fr. John