

There is a beautiful legend about a thorn bird. It is said that the thorn bird sings only once in its lifetime. Leaving its nest, it searches for a bush, a bush with long and sharp thorns. On finding such a thorny bush, the thorn bird pierces itself on the biggest thorn. It is at that point that it begins to sing. And this sweet and beautiful singing outmatches the lark or the nightingale or any other singing bird. The world pauses in silence and wonder, as they hear the melodious voice from the wounded and dying bird. The legend clearly gives us the message: that the most satisfying moments of life can be purchased only at the price of great pain.

Lent is a time of penance and prayer—a time when we will turn our hearts back to God. We give up things. We fast. We offer alms. We pray more deeply. All of this, we hope, will focus our hearts and souls, drawing us closer to God, improving his image in us and preparing us for the great feast of Easter. It all begins today with the *sign of the cross*, marked with ashes on our foreheads. It is a way of saying “We are dust, unto dust we shall return”. Therefore, we have work to do, and this is the right time.”

But I think those ashes can also be understood in a different way. **They also say: we are a people who have burned out.** The ash is what remains. Our hearts no longer burn with the fervor that they should. We admit we have failed and sinned. *During Lent, we are praying to bring back the light, the fervor.* Our job over these 40 days is to bring it alive, by prayer and sacrifice, charity and hope. Friends, during this Lent, we are invited to stir the embers into a flame and pray for that flame of faith to spread.

In our 1st Reading, Book of the Prophet Joel, the Lord God calls upon us to *return to Him with all our hearts*, with fasting and weeping. He calls us for a *true repentance* and tells us to prepare our hearts. (In the Old Testament, people tore their garments as a sign of repentance – but oftentimes it remained merely an external sign and there was no genuine repentance) We, therefore, are called today to examine our most inner self, and let go, those mistaken ways that have tarnished God’ image in us, and to return to the Lord, saying “Be merciful, O Lord, for I have sinned”.

Clearly, Jesus very strictly *warns us against hypocrisy* in practicing our works of piety, works of mercy. He tells us that our Lenten efforts are to be seen by God; they are not meant to impress our neighbors, or else we miss the reward from our heavenly Father. Also, the three works of piety, viz. Prayer, Fasting & Alms-giving, have been the essential practices that the Church has encouraged in its members as a form of penance, since the early centuries.

So, as we begin this Holy Season with the sign of ashes, the visible sign of repentance, let us begin it in a *proper penitential frame of mind*, seeking out disruption in our lives and replacing them with a constant and humble dependence on God’s grace. Let us come to the Lord today with a humble heart, acknowledging our sinfulness and asking forgiveness for all our sloth, failures and shortcomings. Let us approach Lent, not with trepidation and fear, but rather with joy, as the *season of opportunity*. Let us rejoice in our gracious God, who is ‘slow to anger and abundant in mercy’. And this is the Good News for us on the first day of this most sacred season! Have a Blessed and fruitful Lent! – Fr. James Chitteth cfc