

## **Rend your hearts and not your clothing**

February 21, 2007 (Ash Wednesday)

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

One of the ways that the ancient Hebrews demonstrated their sorrow or anger was by publicly tearing their own clothes. A national emergency or an onslaught of tragic news could obliterate a wardrobe in short order.

So, what does it mean if today's clothes are in the ragbag while tomorrow's are in the closet, ready to flatter us as if nothing had ever happened? No good at all is God's answer. If we sincerely want to convince anybody that our grief is authentic, *particularly God*, then it must be heartfelt. ***Rend your hearts and not your clothing***, as Joel wrote (2:13), then, God promises, genuine reconciliation can happen.

Why is there so much emphasis on the heart, especially on this Ash Wednesday? Because the *heart*, according to the Hebrews, was the *hidden place* or *sanctuary* where faith and understanding and decisive choices were made. It was that deep place of

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conscience, where the unwritten law was etched into the human being's moral makeup. It was the *inner tabernacle* in which the spirit dwelt and through which God encountered individuals and compelled them to act.

But, if the heart is the dwelling place of God and the good, it is also that place where the power of sin gets a grip on human life and from which evil deeds proceed (Mk. 7:14-23). That is why Ash Wednesday calls us to begin a Lent not only of *rending our hearts*, but also of *examining* them as well if reconciliation with God and one another is to mean much of anything to anybody. In other words, the Church calls us in Lent to focus on our sin, our own malfeasance. If we do not address this spiritual disease, then forty days from now, Easter will mean little, except perhaps, a closet full of damaged clothes.

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How, then, shall we keep Lent? We may need to start but surrendering mere *give-up-ism*, that ominous and ancient rubric which leads us to think that giving up overindulgence accomplishes Lent's true purpose. *Giving up avails nothing unless it leads to taking on.* "Taking on" can mean a whole host of things. It might include a few moments of reflection at the end of the day as a means of self-examination. It might mean looking carefully at what we have said and done, our relationship with those closest to us. It might mean making a commitment to a deepened life of prayer, Bible study, or meditation, or reading the works of one of the giants of the Church, *setting aside* a specific time and place to consciously commune with the Lord.

How can we tell when we're making any progress in Lent? It is when we want to push out of consciousness our guilt over things done and things left undone. *That* is when Lent is doing its work. The truth about ourselves breaks through our defenses, threatening our

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manufactured sense of security and well being. But, the pain of such realization is the pain of our healing. Only then is our heart rent, as Joel put it. Only then does the awareness of our own shortcomings cry out for grace and love and the power from God to change. Only then can we genuinely return and begin the process of spiritual rebirth.

Having kept a good Lent, we emerge wounded, perhaps, but ready to receive the Gospel of Easter, God's unconquerable and unfailing love for sinners, which is *always* with us, and revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**AMEN.**