

MARCH 5, 2025 FATHER MICHAEL COUTTS

The Church invites us to enter this joyful season of Lent. But how are we to enter the joyful season of Lent if we are covered with ash—a sackcloth of penance, put ashes on our forehead, and we hear those words, "Meménto hominem in púlverem revertéris" which means "Remember, man, you are dust, and to dust you shall return." It appears rather a dismal scene, rather than a joyful scene.

And yet, Joel, in our first reading, the prophet Joel, and Jesus in the gospel according to Matthew, tells us how exactly we can get into this joyful season, because the emphasis is not on penance, but on returning to God. It does not mean that we do not have to do penance. I have sinned. I have turned away from God. I am fragile. I am weak. And, therefore, whenever I sin, I need to do penance, but the emphasis is not on the penance, but on returning to God.

And that sense of joy, when the exiles return back from exile into Jerusalem, is the same joy that you and I have to keep in our hearts at this time. And the emphasis is in our hearts. Pope Francis, very recently in an encyclical called *Dilexit nos* has spoken about returning to the heart, and he speaks about the reality in the world today. We live in a very superficial world. We look at a person. We look at the size of his or her wallet and we judge them to be all right. We act with a gut reaction. We do not respond, but we react.

We need to discern. We need to decide. We need to know the direction, and then we need to act, but we are not like that. We are so superficial and we are frenetic in our actions. We start one job, and before finishing, we go to another job because we are bored, because we find that there is something more attractive, and we move from one thing to another. And a third reason why our world is so superficial is because we are led by

our media today. They tell us who we are, what we are to dress, where we are to go, in order to be accepted in society.

And so, we are called to return to God. But not only with our heads, but also with our hearts. It's not "metanoia," which means "a change of mind," but "meta cardia," which means "a change of our very heart." It's something that we need to do, but we also need to pray—to pray, to fast, and to give alms, because I need something very tangible from day, to day, to day, in order to keep myself focused. But having done that as a foundation, then I return to God with all my heart.

And how do I return? I return to the Father who has loved me so much that He sent His only Son to be our saviour. I return to the Son who died for me on the cross. I return to the Spirit who has given me the gifts of wisdom and knowledge, and understanding, and piety, and a sense of awe before the Lord. What a beautiful way of returning to God. But that does not mean to say that I don't have to fast, and to pray, and to give alms. Because God says to me, "Return to me because you will be my people and I will be your God."

What a beautiful way to enter into the season of Lent, as we turn to God, and realize that God has been waiting for us all this time. It is we who keep on holding back. I'm not worthy. I am a sinner. True, we are all that, but God still loves us just like a mother loves her child, no matter what the child does. Maybe disappointed, but the love never fails. God bless you all.