



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Ash Wednesday 28 February 2001

1. *"O that today you would hear his voice: harden not your hearts".*

This invitation echoes in our souls as today, Ash Wednesday, we begin our Lenten journey. It will lead to the Easter Triduum, the living memorial of the Lord's passion, death and resurrection, the central mystery of our salvation.

The holy season of Lent, which has always held deep meaning for the Christian people, recalls ancient biblical events such as the 40 days of the universal flood, a prelude to the covenant that God made with Noah; Israel's 40-year pilgrimage through the desert to the promised land; the 40 days that Moses remained on Mount Sinai, where he received the tablets of the Law from Yahweh.

In particular, the Lenten season invites us to relive with Jesus the 40 days that he spent praying and fasting in the wilderness before beginning his public mission, which culminated on Calvary in the sacrifice of the Cross, the definitive victory over death.

2. *"Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return".* The traditional rite of distributing ashes, which is repeated today, is always very eloquent, and the words accompanying it are expressive. In its simplicity, it suggests the transitory nature of earthly life: everything passes and is destined to die. We are wayfarers in this world, wayfarers who must never forget their true and final destination: heaven. For, though we are dust and destined to become dust, nevertheless not all will come to an end. Man, created in the image and likeness of God, is destined for eternal life. In dying on the Cross, Jesus opened the way for every human being.

The entire Ash Wednesday liturgy helps us to focus on this fundamental truth of faith and spurs us to undertake a resolute journey of personal renewal. We must change our way of thinking and acting, set our gaze firmly on the face of Christ crucified and make his Gospel our daily rule of life. "*Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel*": let this be our Lenten programme, as we enter an atmosphere of prayerful listening to the Spirit.

3. "*Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak*" (Mt 26: 41). Let us be guided by these words of the Lord in a committed effort of conversion and spiritual renewal. In daily life there is a risk of being absorbed in material concerns and interests. Lent is an appropriate time for a reawakening of genuine faith, for a salutary renewal of our relationship with God and for a more generous Gospel commitment. The means available to us are the same as always, but we must use them more intensely in these weeks: prayer, fasting and penance, as well as almsgiving, that is, the sharing of what we have with the needy. This personal and community journey of asceticism can be particularly difficult at times because of the secularized environment in which we live. But for this very reason our effort must be stronger and more determined.

"*Watch and pray*". If Christ's command applies to all times, it seems more eloquent and forceful at the start of Lent. Let us accept it with humble docility. Let us prepare to carry it out in practical acts of conversion and reconciliation with our brethren. Only in this way can faith be reinvigorated, hope be strengthened and love become the way of life that distinguishes the believer.

4. The fruit of such a courageous ascetical journey can only be a greater openness to the needs of our neighbour. Those who love the Lord cannot close their eyes to individuals and peoples who are tried by suffering and poverty. After contemplating the face of the crucified Lord, how can we not recognize him and serve him in those who are suffering and abandoned? Jesus himself, who invites us to stay with him watching and praying, also asks us to love him in our brothers and sisters, remembering that "*as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me*" (Mt 25: 40). The fruit of a Lent intensely lived will thus be a greater and more universal love.

May Mary, the example of docile listening to the voice of the Spirit, guide us on the penitential journey we are beginning today. May she help us to treasure all the opportunities the Church offers us in order to prepare ourselves worthily for the celebration of the Easter mystery.

I extend a cordial welcome to the parish pilgrimages, the choirs and the groups of students present at this audience. Upon all of you and your families I invoke the abundant gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Father called for an immediate ceasefire to the war in Afghanistan and asked the international community not to forget the tragic situation that is particularly threatening the young, the sick and the elderly:

A serious humanitarian emergency is developing in Afghanistan. There are alarming reports of countless victims among those displaced by drought and civil war. Thousands of people are in danger of dying from hunger and the cold, particularly children, the sick and the elderly.

I express my deep appreciation of the efforts of the humanitarian organizations that are trying to bring urgent aid to the Afghan people. As I invite the international community not to forget this tragic situation, I hope that the combatants in an overly long and bloody war will arrange an immediate ceasefire so that relief can be brought in time to the areas most at risk.