

Ash Wednesday – February 18, 2026 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 6:30am Mass – 490 words

In every age, God has offered the grace of repentance. This is one of the lenses through which we could read sacred scripture, and we would see the manifold opportunities he offered down through salvation history – from the preaching of Jonah to the preaching of John the Baptist to the preaching of the disciples and the early Church. In one scripture passage, God declares this reality as an oath: “‘As I live’, says the Lord, ‘I do not desire the death of the sinner but his repentance’.” This is his will for all, and this is the chance that he gives us in our age, too.

Well, far be it from us not to obey his will. Thus we begin another Lent, under the sign of ashes, a sign of repentance. Except that the blessed ashes, being a sacramental, will also help open for us the channels of grace so that we may more readily carry out what they signify. But how do we need to repent? In what ways do we need to be more fully turned toward the Lord? That, in fact, is a good mental image to contemplate, how most of us are effectively contorted as parts of us are turned to the Lord and parts not. May he help us all to get straightened out!

The means proposed to us by the gospel, echoed by the Church in every age, are those of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting – albeit, done humbly; not attention-seeking, not boastfully. These three venerable practices help us to order our lives aright, to focus on what is truly important, and to be purified of our attachments to things that are not good for us. In what ways are we embracing these disciplines this year? Perhaps we have not fully decided yet, and that is okay, but maybe the Lord will also help us this day to make our final decisions and settle in.

Of the three disciplines, prayer is perhaps most important, for it disposes us to hear the Lord’s voice, as he speaks through the movements of our hearts and in how he gently guides our thoughts – and who will thus inspire us how to turn more fully to him. The verse before the gospel quoted the psalm, “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts”. Would that we would more regularly perceive how he speaks to us, for our salvation is his project in us, not our project toward him. Prayer is so fundamental, a precondition to right fasting and almsgiving.

And so we prepare to receive the ashes devoutly and entreat the Lord to open our hearts and strengthen our wills, so that this outward sign may truly accomplish in us the interior renewal it signifies. God is offering this grace to us, too, in our time, thus verifying the words of St. Paul: “Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation”.