

## *Ash Wednesday*

My Lent resolutions always seem to address similar areas: adjusting my diet, setting priorities with my time, learning to say no—and learning to say yes. Sometimes Lent teaches me new habits that stick; other years I slide right back into the same faults. There are two important steps in dealing with sin. One is acknowledging it; the other is stopping it. On Ash Wednesday we're all good at step one: acknowledging our need to repent; we even wear ashes in public. That's pretty easy. But reaching the finish line of Easter with step two means making some personal changes. And that's hard.

If you want to move from merely acknowledging sin to stopping it, you may style your Lent accordingly. Put aside food and drink that are harmful. Exercise regularly. Increase prayer at home or at church. Visit the sick. Contact the estranged family member you've been ignoring. Feed the hungry. Donate. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are three Lenten exercises drawn from today's gospel. One approach to Lent is to select something from each area, especially if sin has pulled us away from those practices. We should see personal progress during Lent, but sometimes we do our penance but don't change our habits. Sin is so attractive that part of us doesn't want to let it go.

Each Ash Wednesday we sing verses from Psalm 51. The refrain for our responsorial focuses on step one: "Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned." We sing that in the plural—"we have sinned." Yet sin is ultimately in the singular: I have sinned.

Of the 150 psalms, seven of them are traditionally called penitential. The most famous of those is today's responsorial. The opening lines were written thousands of years ago, but they still express the sentiments of a sincere soul on Ash Wednesday: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your merciful love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. Wash me completely from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. My transgressions, truly I know them; my sin is always before me." The psalm perfectly expresses the remorse of step one.

But Psalm 51 doesn't stop there. It asks for God's help to change. Our cantor sang on our behalf, "Create a pure heart for me, O God; renew a steadfast spirit within me.... sustain in me a willing spirit." That prayer enlists God's help to put our sin away. We ask God not just to forgive what we have done, but to do something more: "sustain in me a willing spirit." Sustain in me a desire to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong. When competing desires take hold of us, we often succumb to the one that feels more pleasurable, and we return to the same sin. Some people find solace in prayer. But in addition to prayer, we fast. We fast not just from food but from activities that are wrong. Lent is trying to get our attention to do something more than pray, to sacrifice our time in fruitful ways. Some people seek help help to overcome the false temptations to which they too often succumb.

Receiving ashes is step one, acknowledging our sin. That's the easy part. The hard part lies ahead: stopping the sin. What are we willing to change this Lent? Are we willing to change ourselves?