

ASH WED ABC – (Homily 02)
“Ambassadors of Reconciliation”

(Joel 2:12-18; Psalm 51; 2Cor 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)

When former premier of Manitoba, Gary Doer, retired from provincial politics, he had another more prestigious role waiting for him. He accepted to become the Canadian ambassador to the United States. He moved from being a politician to being a diplomat. It was an upward career move to say the least, one many would envy.

According to St. Paul, the rest of the world should envy us, because we are all diplomats, ambassadors of reconciliation.

An ambassador is someone who represents someone else in world affairs, who speaks for a government on the world stage, who is the public face of a country in international politics and world affairs.

As ambassadors of reconciliation, then, we must be the voice of Jesus in the world, the public face of Jesus, letting the world know who Jesus is, the forgiveness of God, and what he has come to establish in the world, the reign of God.

But how do we become these ambassadors of reconciliation?

St. Paul sketches out a process that helps us to understand what being an ambassador of reconciliation means. We must first of all be reconciled with God ourselves. But that is only a first step. Next we must become the very righteousness of God. We must become just like God. Then and only then can we be ambassadors of reconciliation.

Cary Landry sings a beautiful hymn called *Lay Your Hands*. One of the verses of that hymn goes like this: *Let them bring your forgiveness and healing, lay your hands, gently lay your hands*. Cary Landry has it right. To be ambassadors of reconciliation, we need to be forgiven and healed. To be reconciled to God, we need to first of all receive God’s forgiveness, then go on to experience God’s healing power in our lives, making us whole.

Joel in the first reading proclaims our need to repent with all our hearts, to

let go of our sinful ways, to be sorry, to want to change, to turn back to God, to return to the Lord. We do that through a heartfelt celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation, something all of us should resolve to do during the period of Lent. That is how we are reconciled with God. God has already forgiven us in Christ; we need now to receive that love as forgiveness through repentance and confession.

The Greek word for this is *metanoia*. *Meta* means change, and *noia* means mind. The Greeks thought that we had a higher, noble mind, and a lower, debased mind. To repent is to begin to live out of that higher mind, that noble mind-set, to change our lives. Jesus is the forgiveness of God made flesh. We experience him and his forgiveness, through repentance.

Then we need to go deeper, to go on a healing journey, to experience his healing. Jesus came not just to forgive us, but also and especially, to heal us. We need to acknowledge the defects of character and the short comings, the painful emotions and negative attitudes that caused us to sin in the first place. Once we are aware of these, and can name them and admit them, then we can humbly pray and ask God to remove them one by one, so that we won't sin in that way again. This is how we can become Christ-like, the very righteousness of God.

Then, forgiven and healed, reconciled with God and having become the very righteousness of God, we can truly live as ambassadors of reconciliation, helping others follow the same path back to God which is the goal of all human life.

Every Ash Wednesday, we hear the same gospel in which Jesus teaches us to follow the discipline of almsgiving, prayer and fasting, and to do so in a humble and unobtrusive manner. There is good reason why the Church provides us with this gospel as we begin this period of preparation for the three great days of Easter.

These disciplines of Lent are designed to help us to repent, to be reconciled with God, and to become the righteousness of God, to be ambassadors of reconciliation.

When we give alms we are keeping the command to love others as Jesus loved us. We can give them our love, our affirmation, our blessing, our time and attention, as Jesus did to us.

When we pray, we are growing in our relationship with God. One moment of loving union with God, who wants to be one with us, is better than hours of perhaps misguided activity or even ministry. We are truly being reconciled with God, and becoming the righteousness of God, because we are relating to God in an intimate manner through prayer.

And when we fast, we are following the commandment to love ourselves, to know ourselves. We can fast from excesses of all kinds, but also fast from criticism and envy and gossip. Fasting also helps us become the righteousness of God.

So as we begin this special season of Lent, the message from St. Paul is clear. We are ambassadors of reconciliation, but only after we have been reconciled to God through forgiveness, and only after we have become the righteousness of God through healing.

A rather mundane example might help illustrate this message. Joe was caught speeding by a policeman from his own church. Embarrassed, he tried to defend himself with little white lies to no avail. It looked like he was going to get a ticket as the policeman wrote on his pad and handed him a piece of paper. Angrily, he opened it only to realize it was a note that said, "Dear Joe, I had a daughter once who was killed by a speeding driver. He got a fine, three months in jail and was free again to hug his daughters, three of them. I only had one. I have tried to forgive that man a thousand times. A thousand times I thought I had. Maybe I did, but I need to do it again, even now. Pray for me. And be careful. My son is all I have left. Bob."

Joe watched the policeman drive away, then drove the speed limit home, resolved to never speed again. He had changed. He had received forgiveness from the policeman in a way that had touched his heart and led him to an inner transformation, a *metanoia*, that would lead to a change in his driving. He would now be, just a little more, an ambassador of reconciliation.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is itself an experience of receiving God's forgiveness and healing through his Word and by the reception of the Body and Blood of Jesus.

May our celebration today empower us to go out to all others, forgiven and healed, as ambassadors of reconciliation.

