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There is a saying in German: “On Ash Wednesday, everything is over.” (“Am Aschermittwoch ist alles vorbei.”) Well, right: “Carnival is over”, as the saying in English goes. Linguists still discuss, I guess, where the word “Carnival” might come from. Is it derived from Latin “Carrus navalis”, to be translated like: “Carts on Wheels”, which would apply to those sometimes strangely decorated barrows forming sheer endless carnival processions moving through the major cities along the river Rhine in Germany on Carnival Monday, like two days ago in Cologne, or Mayence. Or is it rather deduced from Latin “Carne, vale” which means: “Farewell to the Flesh”? Personally, I prefer the latter interpretation: After days, or even weeks of excesses in drinking, singing, flirting, joking, kidding and what else, all of a sudden, everything of this kind has to come to a standstill. Confession on Ash Wednesday, nearly mandatory for pious Roman Catholics, provides the opportunity to get absolution. After nights and night of debauchery, and kicking over the traces, this means making a good bargain. Everything is over – but everything will be forgiven, too. At least this is the way, average people see it. Of course, now the weeks of Lenten fast begins – no meat to be eaten until Easter morning - incomprehensible for South Africans, I reckon, no braai, no boerewors, nor steak, nor biltong to nibble from; no wine, no beer, no booze to sip at. Hard times, heart-rending, indeed. But as hard as it may seem, at any rate to someone who cannot do without distraction, without intemperance: nevertheless this ascetic exercise is merely an outward discipline, and maybe just a superficial attitude. I may be helpful, though, even outwardly, in order to lose weight, to get sober in your minds, to concentrate more on your spirit than on your body. That would not be bad at all.

But in Joel’s words, something totally different is raised, something rather radical is at stake. In God’s name, and in the authority of the Almighty, the prophet today admonishes us to “rend our hearts”. It is not about drinking less, eating in a more moderate way for a while, refraining from superfluous consumption, or practicing abstinence. That would be comparable to “rending our garments” – which, of course, is a rite of mourning, a custom to signalize one’s sorrow, a tradition to show one’s grief. But the claim that Joel puts, and that he addresses to Israel and us alike, goes far deeper than just tearing our clothes: It is about an inner process that takes place in the center of the person. It is about an inward operation that affects the very core of a human being. Moreover, if we listen carefully and observe precisely the prophet’s diction and the words he makes use of: God’s demand and request is to pry open our innermost organ, to tear apart our primary control unit – which is our heart. Our heart is the instance where the directions are given, where decisions are prepared, where judgments are made, where self-consciousness is settled. And now, the order is issued: Rend your hearts, tear them apart!

Now, how can I do so? How may I accomplish this? Can you imagine to open your ribcage, grab your heart, while it is still pulsating, and tear it to pieces? And even if you were able to come up with the idea of doing so – what would be the outcome if you effectively managed to do so? Your heart, not only broken, but actually torn to tatters – you would certainly die. A complete breakdown of your blood circulation would be the consequence; no blood to circulate in your veins, no oxygen being transported to your lungs and through your brain, all

vital functions coming to an end. Exitus. We may easily understand that we usually would not nor could do this to ourselves, would we? Now, we see that the prophet is speaking metaphorically.

Yet the metaphors convey to us what God is aiming at. He wants to gather each and everybody in His beloved people and have them repent. He does not except the babies, nor the old folks; He does not relinquish those in the prime of their lives, nor does He ignore the newly-weds. And we have to observe that it is the people of Israel whom God approaches, It is less the individuals than the collective of His beloved sons and daughters whom He reaches out for. It is His chosen people in its entirety whom God is recalling to live with Him. It is the inhabitants of the Promised Land, who God prompts to turn back to Him. It is the Israelites who God has guarded as the apple of His eye: these are invited and even urged to rely on God, to put their trust in Him; straightforward they are, so to speak, compelled to return to God who has made them what they are, namely His inheritance, His beloved people.

Considering this, we learn that indeed, we cannot tear our hearts, rend them, or disrupt them by ourselves. And I am not talking about the medical, anatomical, and physiological problems that might occur. Rather, in the realm of biblical thinking and theological consideration, we must understand, that God Himself must be the one to cause us to repent, to make us regret, to induce us to do penance. Only if and when He confronts us with what we are lacking in His eyes, and only if and when He addresses our shortcomings, we are provided the chance to really admit our faults, to earnestly concede our wrongdoing, and to sincerely confess that we are not in a healthy and salutary relationship with our Creator. It must be God Himself to pry open our encrusted heart; it has to be Him to break open our barricaded minds, it is necessarily Him to unclothe our spirit so He may enter there.

And God does so. His holy will, codified e.g. in the Decalogue, originally meant to be His salutary guidance for his people, confronts us with what are meant to do, but have left undone, and at the same time, shows us quite plainly, what we are forbidden to do, but have done. And Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, reveals the deeper, innermost meaning of the commandments by tracing back sin to its roots in our hearts and minds. But if it were only for this confrontation, no salvation would appear on the horizon. That is why God's precious, promising Gospel must always be added to the proclamation of God's Law. The Church's proclamation thus becomes a means through which Christ works repentance and forgiveness of sins in those who hear the Word, and thus brings us from death to new life.

That is what true repentance is about. Only in this way, with God Himself unceasingly and continuously, working at our hearts, working in our hearts, penance will be intrinsically promising, helpful, and salutary. The Gospel, being the truly liberating word of God, accomplishes the bringing of people to faith and into the communion with God, or – if we have fallen from it – bringing us back into this very life-giving communion. Our hearts may be torn when we realize how far from God we find ourselves, how much of love for Him we are lacking, how many times we have been busy with anything else but His word and will. It will not be our “fasting and bodily preparation” that will bring us back to God, although they are “in fact a fine external discipline”, as Martin Luther puts it in this Small Catechism. Rather it

will be God's call, His asking, begging and bidding that attract us to find our ways back into His arms.

His heart is wide open, His arms are widespread to receive us in the realm of His mercy. – And this does happen, the very the very moment your Lord and Savior says to you: "Your sins are forgiven."

Amen.

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