

Ash Wednesday, 2017
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

(this homily begins with Fr. Michael holding up a small, two-sided mirror so that all can see it)

Do you know what this is? (A mirror!)

Now, this mirror is different than many of the mirrors that we use. Most of the mirrors in my house are big, flat and attached to the wall. But THIS one is small enough that you can hold it in your hand.

This mirror has a chord, because it has a light around the outside, so you can see better when you look into it.

And if you look at it on *this* side, everything looks just like it would in a regular mirror.

But if you look into it on the *other* side, it is a *stronger* mirror, almost like a magnifier. Everything looks larger.

If you look at your face on the regular side of the mirror, it just looks normal. But on the stronger side, your face looks bigger and closer. You can see things better.

I don't use this very often. But last year, on the day after Ash Wednesday, I had to grab this mirror.

I had gotten something in my eye as I got ready to come to church that morning. I looked at my eye in the mirror on the wall – but I couldn't see anything.

So I got this mirror, and I plugged it in. I used the magnifying side, the stronger side, to look at my eye. And sure enough, I found the small piece of dirt that had gotten stuck in my eye.

Thanks to the strong mirror, I was able to get the dirt out and my eye felt better.

And just as I was getting ready to put the mirror away, I looked in it one more time. And I saw something that I had missed.

Remember, this was the day after Ash Wednesday. On Ash Wednesday evening, when I went to bed, I washed my face. I looked in the wall mirror the night before, and my face looked clean.

The next morning morning, when I was brushing my teeth, my face looked clean.

But when I looked at my face using the stronger side of this mirror, I could see that there were still smudges of ashes in the pores of my skin on my forehead. There were still dark spots that weren't really clean.

In fact, as I looked into the strong mirror, I could see that my face, which had looked so clean, was really in need of more washing. So I got the soap and water, and went to work!

In some ways, Lent is like this mirror. What do I mean?

Well, through most of the year, we are busy people. We have a lot to get done. We have work to do, and homework to finish, and projects, and plans.

We have people that we love, and some people we don't like so much. We have things that make us worry, and things we struggle with.

And in the midst of all that activity, we know that Jesus is there. So, we occasionally talk to him. And we come to mass. We try to learn more about him.

And when we look at ourselves in the mirror, we can see ourselves. But often we don't look too closely or carefully. We just glance at ourselves and say, "I'm OK."

But each year, God gives us this holy season of Lent. And Lent is like the *stronger* side of the mirror. Lent is the time when the light of the Gospel shines a bit more clearly on our lives.

Lent is the time when Jesus asks us to use the other side of the mirror, to take a closer look, to see if there is some smudge or ash in our lives that we just didn't see before.

Lent is our opportunity to take a closer look.

In today's scripture readings, we hear about the ancient practices which help us to look more closely at our lives, and to see our lives through the eyes of God.

We hear about fasting. That is, we eat less, consume less, spend less. It is hard to know how hungry we are for God when our bellies are too full. It's hard to pay attention to the hungry people around us when we have way too much. So we simplify our lives by fasting, by giving some things up, so that we can see our lives more clearly.

We hear about prayer. Prayer is our conversation with God. It is our willingness to talk with

God, and our willingness to listen to God.

Jesus invites us to pray more this Lent, so that we can thank God for all the ways that we have been blessed, and listen as God tells us how we can do a better job in serving him. Prayer helps us to see our lives more clearly.

Almsgiving. That is a fancy word that basically means, 'give.' Be charitable. Serve. Work to make other people's lives better. We fast - we eat less and spend less - so that we have more to give to others. When I serve others, I am serving Jesus. And that helps me to see my life more clearly.

Fasting. Prayer, Almsgiving. The classic practices of Lent. They form the strong mirror that helps us to see our lives more clearly,

When I have the God-given courage to look at my life more carefully, I may see what God wants me to do next. I see how God wants me to draw closer to him, by forgiving someone, by giving up my negative speech.

God may ask me to turn off my phone and electronics so that I actually talk to other human beings. God may ask me to say what's right and do what's right.

There may be sins in my life that I haven't really seen, simply because I have not looked carefully enough to see them.

When God looks at you, God looks at you with love. And since God loves us, God wants nothing but the best for us in our lives. So God wants to show us how we can *be* better, *do* better and *love* better, because all of these things will bring us joy.

So this Lent, let's pick up the Gospel of Jesus, and use it as our strong mirror, so that together we can see ourselves clearly, and love each other the way that Jesus teaches us to love.