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## **Homily of the Most Rev. Stephen A. Hero for Ash Wednesday 2026**

Scholars think the Book of the Prophet Joel may have been written after Israel had been conquered by the Persians and after the Temple had been rebuilt in 515 BC. God's People still had their 'land of promise,' but it was a far from happy time. There was now no king, and Israel was still surrounded by massive and greedy empires: Alexander and Artaxerxes on the not-too-distant horizon of history.

When the Prophet Joel calls his solemn fast today in our first reading, summoning priest and people to fast and pray, bridegroom and bride, infant and elder, it is because something horrible has taken place: a terrible plague of locusts has destroyed crop, countryside and now even the city. Joel describes the effects of this plague as an army marching through the city. Everything edible is destroyed; pillaged by mindless, marauding insects, and there is very little left for the people to eat. God's chosen people, once liberated from Egypt after signs and wonders like this plague of locusts, now seems to be treated itself as the enemy of God.

When Israel's every bridge seems burnt, every favour forgotten, the prophet still invites the People to trust, to repent, and even to offer to the Lord some of what is left of their precious grain and drink. This will be a sign that they revere Him more than his gifts, that their very real hunger has not turned them into the greedy locusts that have taken over their land. The end of the Book of Joel will tell of a wonderful reversal of Israel's present situation as the God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love ... relents from punishing and pours out his Spirit upon his dying People.

Today the Church's Season of Lent begins in ashes and with a picture of the complete devastation of the land by locust, but see how it also begins with this image of God the Lord as becoming jealous for his land ... and having pity on his people.

The Lord loves his people and if it takes dust and ashes to make way for a new creation, a better land, God will not flinch to ask his children to swallow a medicine that will cure what is killing them.

So, Lent begins with Israel's experience of God's just judgment but also his tender mercy, his jealous love for us. Israel could not know that the Father would go further and would send his very Son into our flesh, into the land, as a Bridegroom claiming his beloved Bride. Jesus himself will not be spared the judgement of God and will stand willingly in our place between the vestibule and altar, as Priest, praying his Father spare our life, wandering into a devastated land in search of us, offering his life lovingly in exchange for our dry dust and ashes.

The New Testament prophet Paul joins the Old Testament Joel, in begging us not to accept this grace of God in vain. Have I been reduced in some ways to rubble? Do my sins – like familiar (but false) friends – entice and demand, cling too close? Lent astounds us each year with this promise that there is hope. Even if our personal Christian life in some ways may seem to be a disaster, a failure, a land riddled with locusts, a bit of ash blown to and fro with every changing wind – Lent nevertheless announces the Presence of One who is greater than our sins and whose beauty can move our hearts to real love and true repentance. Jesus is jealous for our love, jealous for his land, and he comes looking for it this Lent.

The sign that we have in our first reading of the great assembly of Israel called together by the trumpet to fast and pray, to weep together, will be supplanted by that other great assembly of the Church in shining white robes at the Easter Vigil, weeping now with tears of joy at the mercy of God that has found a place in our body and soul, ashes re-animated by the breath of God.

When Jesus shows us in the Gospel today how to respond to his love and repent this Lent, he speaks of giving alms, praying, and fasting. He teaches us to do these worthy practices especially in secret where [our] Father who sees ... in secret will reward us. There is something about becoming more conscious, more aware in faith of the Father's face gazing upon us in love, that serene and kindly countenance with which he sees his beloved sons and daughters.

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Whatever the disaster, the shipwreck, the famine, even if all seems to be ash this Wednesday, we can hope. God's love is greater than our sin. The Father in secret, invisible, is looking with love upon us and he sends his only Son among us to reveal the Father's face. This does not mean that the way back to the Father in Christ will be easy. Lent lasts 40 days. It takes time to conquer our land. The Lord has an ordeal to go through for us, a Cross to construct, a hell to harrow before all is remade in Resurrection. Our life this Lent must mysteriously become pliable, responsive to a grace never given in vain.

My brothers and sisters, do not be afraid truly to do battle this Lent. Begin every day in dust, speaking to God in secret, more conscious of his gaze, hungrier for God than for bread, giving away what distracts, what can benefit or bring joy to others. The humble will be exalted. Ashes will become fertile ground, a land that Lord himself dwells in and calls his own. If you don't believe that you can do it, you are right about that. But believe that God can do it and wants to do it more than us.