



Let us cherish fasting for fasting
is the great safeguard along with

PRAYER & ALMSGIVING

They deliver human beings from
death

cherish

“Jesus was led by the Spirit
into the wilderness.....
He fasted forty days and forty nights”
(Matthew 4:1-2)

The Forty Days of Lent have a great biblical precedent, not least in the forty years the people of Israel wandered the desert in search of the Promised Land. The example for our own practice of “Quadragesima” lies in the forty days Jesus was in the wilderness before he undertook his public ministry. A time of discipline and preparation is important before any important event or decision in life. Prayer, Fasting and Abstinence are the three tools we use as we prepare to celebrate the great mystery of Easter the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of our Lord. No accident that the Lenten exercises really came into focus with the Baptism of Adult Converts at the Easter Vigil and the Reconciliation of Sinners during the days preceding it. These important events also lie in the foundation of the Lenten Season.

Fasting and Abstinence have nothing to do with hating or despising the world and its material goods. Neither are they ways of punishing ourselves. Fasting is one way in which we deepen our awareness of God. By denying ourselves food or a luxury (the sweets, the cigarettes, the alcohol) what else do we do except say “I do not depend on these things”. It enables us to step back from the usual habits and distractions and give particular attention to God. An outward restraint can be a sign and symbol of an inner attention, and a help towards it. This is a meaning of the great symbol of ashes given on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. This is also the Prayer which lies at the heart of Lent. Reminding ourselves to give time to God so that God may speak to us in the silence of our heart.

All major faiths encourage fasting and abstinence as spiritual disciplines. The Christian Faith is no exception. Jesus himself fasted in the desert as part of his preparation to meet his tempter. The early Christians observed fasts. (Acts 13:2 14:23). The Fathers of the Early Church recommended the practice also.

“Fasting is food
for the soul, nourishment
for the spirit”
(Ambrose of Milan c.339-97).

When Jesus fasted in the wilderness for forty days, he did so in order to clarify his relationship with God and the nature of his calling. To face inner temptation, he needed to explore how he stood in relation to material needs and worldly power, and to affirm that his ultimate trust was in God “Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”. (Matthew 4:4).

Our fasting and abstinence, if we are serious about them, have a particular significance in a world dominated by a culture of consumption. Today we are all encouraged to think of ourselves as ‘consumers’ or ‘customers’, as if the material things of creation had no other meaning than to be used by human beings. Fasting is a form of restraint in which we stand back to contemplate things as they are in themselves, as they are in relationship to God the creator, and not just as they exist for us. “Fasting prevents us from identifying ourselves with the world in order merely to possess it, and enables us to see the world in a light coming from elsewhere. Then every creature, everything, becomes an object of contemplation. Fasting puts between us and the world a wondering and respectful distance”. So wrote Oliver Clement, an Orthodox Christian theologian who was born into an agnostic family in 1921.

Real enjoyment of the world comes not from possessing it or consuming it, but from a detached enjoyment of its goodness. Far from being a negative reaction to the material world, fasting is a positive affirmation of it. Fasting leads to thanksgiving. In fact, there is no effective act of thanksgiving –no Eucharist- without some form of self-restraint.

Fasting is always linked in the teaching of the Fathers with prayer and almsgiving. Charitable giving is part and parcel of Lent. Solidarity demands that others who are in need benefit from our self-restraint – otherwise even fasting and abstinence can be seen as self-indulgence, as the slimming world reminds us! Each one of us will have our own good intentions as we receive ashes on Ash Wednesday. Self-denial and solidarity with the poor must surely be part and parcel of our Lenten practice. The Diocesan charity for Lent is the support of the Syrian Refugee Families Project. Let our prayer, fasting and abstinence be of benefit not just to ourselves but to those who are in desperate need of our charitable support.



A POEM
For Ash Wednesday

My heart is ready, Yes! My heart is ready!
Like a desert I am parched. My soul of sand
Soaks up the rain at once is dry again, and
The inner fount of life is rank and deadly.
In such abysmal straits, remind the self
That we are loved, for all our self despair;
That Jesus Christ has sought us out, that care
Will open up the inner streams of health.
God's love is real and God's affection never spent.
So, be watered, tended; be refreshed, this Lent.

(Archdeacon Harold McDonald 2006)

ASH WEDNESDAY Malcolm Guite

Receive this cross of ash upon your brow
Brought from the burning of Palm Sunday's cross;
The forests of the world are hurting now
And you make late repentance for the loss.
But all the trees of God would clap their hands,
The very stones themselves would shout and sing,
If you could covenant to love these lands
And recognise in Christ their lord and king.
He sees the slow destruction of those trees,
He weeps to see the ancient places burn,
And still you make what purchases you please
And still to dust and ashes you return.
But hope could rise from ashes even now
Beginning with this sign upon your brow.