

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## This Is The Big Lent

Lent in Year One of the Lectionary is the Big One: it contains the three great scrutiny Gospels - the Woman at Jacob's Well, the Man Born Blind, and the Raising of Lazarus. Before them we have (next week) Matthew's telling of the Transfiguration, and (this Sunday) his account of Jesus' Fast in the Desert. The other two years of the Lectionary always look comparatively a bit thin.

### **Fasting: A Door Into The Depths**

Wilfully entering into hunger is a religious practice that is mysteriously present in many different cultures. Why? We need to ask, because it's really very foreign to our western way with food. One of the aims of the society we live in is to make feeding a place where we no longer have anxiety. The fridge-freezer and the supermarket between them put an end to that. We'll always know where our next meal is coming from. This seems a harmless desire, but it has one huge drawback: it can effectively kill desire itself, by emptying of meaning one of the most important factors of our day. The act of eating should be, and has been, a place of depth and resonance. For instance, offering food has been a sincere sign of affirmation: *I want you to live*, is what it says. Sharing food is a deep sign of solidarity: *I am beside you, I give you a share of my own life*. These things have not stopped being true, not have they lost their eloquence: even when eating has been reduced to a lonely cramming of indifferent trash into tiny spaces robbed from the work I do or the travel I'm trapped in, the real meaning of feeding remains. Just look at the phenomenon of *anorexia nervosa*, and see how the *refusal* of these messages can be a matter of life and death. In the same way, *choosing not to eat* is a radical deed in a field of real power. It immediately raises the stakes of our life and opens up depths we seldom visit. It is amazing how quickly our self-satisfaction begins to vanish, and we start to ask ourselves more challenging questions than "beef or pork?" when we have closed the fridge door definitively for the day.

### **A Snack In the Eye For Our Demons**

I believe when we are tempted to quaff a little caffeine, or pop a square or two of chocolate into the yawning chasm over which our tightrope is stretched, we are trying to kill off the haunting presence of our real desires. We

actually spend much of the day doing this (thus our obesity problem). Might it not be opportune to turn the tables, and to enter bravely into our desire in all its dimensions? The longer you fast, the more you desire; and after a while a cream doughnut and a nice cup of tea appear for the dummy comforter they are. There is something really hungry in our depths, and constantly quieting it and banishing it with little sops and placebos soon looks ridiculous...if only we can let our hunger grow long enough.

### **Not Just Food, Either!**

As well as physical food and drink, we can fast from other things which we set between us and our bodily reality: for example, noise - I mean the chosen sort, like the constant thump of the stereo, the twitter of the radio, the more insistent spectacle of the TV. Good to let silence reign for a while, if you want to think with your whole mind. Again, physical comfort, and sleep can trap us into sluggishness; then the constant need to be with others can rob us of knowledge of our own inner life. Busyness, the awareness of the treadmill which *appears* to give our life its meaning, can keep us on a lower tier of our life where the deep questions that truly dominate us will never be asked.

### **Caro Cardo Salutis**

Our need to know who we are, and what we're here for, will never leave us. Our need for trust, in a sense which will address all that can happen to us, will not change. Such questions can direct us towards God; and if we choose never to ask them, we remain stunted in our growth. When we are baptised, the flow of sacred Chrism anoints us to sharing in the royal dignity of Christ. We are to live, from then, with awareness of the trajectory of our being: the knowledge that God doesn't create, and then abandon what he has created. Without doubt, our obedience to God must be observed first of all by the body. Tertullian said: *The flesh is the pivot of salvation*. If that's true, then the obedience of the body to the oncoming mystery of Christ must be essential. I think that's what fasting is for. We kick all fake consolation aside, and seek with longing for the true bread, for "every word that comes from the mouth of God". Here is a taste we have to acquire!  
*Fr Philip*