

## LENT

It is, I think, very important to say at the beginning of Lent that this is no time for organised misery. It is a time for fasting, of course, and a time for prayer, and a time for giving. *None* of these three things is a cause for sadness or solemnity. I will tell you why.

### **A Cause For Real Sadness**

Some things exist that are a cause for real sorrow: but they are not so many as we feel. Fatal illness, for instance, is not finally a cause for radical sorrow. There are ways in which it can be welcome, right, salvific, even redemptive. Those who deal with it and those who suffer it can come to sanctity through it. Permanent quarrels, incorrigible breakdown of relationship, enduring refusal to forgive, persistent rejection of the truth: these are cause for genuine sadness and, if we persist in them, we have the power to distort the world, and ourselves, into a new and ugly fashion which darkens the image of God. Even then, the mercy of God is never foxed or frustrated, and shines on with unimpaired sovereignty; sin cannot recreate the world. Even if I darken my windows, the sun still reigns outside. That is always the ultimate, predominant fact of life. For a Christian, there are no tragedies.

### **Lent Is An Open Door Into Life**

All of our hope and optimism flows from the mystery of Easter, and it is towards this mystery that our faces are now turned. That is the reason why Lent is not a time for imposed misery, institutional gloom. It is, instead, a season of renewal, a time of rebirth; we are lucky to be anglophone, because the Latin nations speak of this season as *fast-time* (Fr. *careme*, It. *quaresima*); *Lent* means *springtime*, and that is the spirit we should seek. It is an earth-quaking, bud-popping, egg-cracking, dawn-breaking season (last week I met a lamb 30 minutes old, which is certainly frisking today in the cold air of the Yorkshire moors). It is the season which will lead us out of death and into a life which will be more than joyous. It is on a promising path that we

set our feet this Wednesday, and we should know how to set out generously.

### **Fasting Is Real Love**

You don't fast because you're off your oats. Nor do you have to say that you've lost the taste for food and drink. Indeed, I've found that fasting makes food taste wonderful. But when you fast, you start to probe your hunger, and it will ask some pretty clear questions if you let it. *Do I live to eat, or eat to live?* And I use *eat* in the broadest possible sense, in this "consumer society" (don't restrict your fasting to food: try fasting from alcohol, telly, noise, sleep, driving, talking, shopping -you go on!). You can fast *secretly* -which is one of the conditions for Lenten validity -and this will then be your act of love for God, on whom you will ultimately wait for *fulfilment*, which I take to be the opposite of fasting. But here is another question: *What will fulfilment be for me?* The new job, the new car, the end of the mortgage, the holiday, the exams, the girl, the boy, the family, the directorship, the chain of office, retirement....just living a few more years? You know, I don't *think* it will do. When I'm fasting, I *know* it won't.

### **Prayer Leads To Love**

In Lent If you fast, prayer can come easier, because the body seems to be waiting as well as the mind; it is as if a hungry body becomes an intimate symbol of a longing heart. We can bring our sundered, riven nature back together in Lenten prayer. Praying can be quite Simple, perhaps just a single line from a Psalm. But it is a door through which God can come, and guide us towards the third act of Lent -the works of love, or as we used to say, *almsgiving*. But again -don't just give money. Give affection, concern and encouragement, give pardon and renew friendship, rebuild the community, restore communication, share yourself more generously, with no strings attached. If you do, Easter will come. *Fr Philip*