

Why Lent?

Be honest: how do you react when you hear the words: *fasting, praying, giving alms*? Well, they say the English spirit has a good dose of Puritan in it; and going back a little further, we have Pelagianism and Manicheism, which dislike or hate the body, and are embarrassed by its crude appetites; and then there is dear old guilt, which is always good for a brief flurry of masochism, after which we'll all be ready for a Paschal Splurge: bring out the roast lamb and choccy cake with eggs on.

I wonder if we can see past the fake rationale for Lent (prayer as relaxation therapy, fasting as slimming, almsgiving as self-image-laundering) to the original purposes of Lent? Lent began as the final lap of a two-year preparation for Baptism. The trainees (*catechumens*) fasted to concentrate their minds, and to symbolise their hunger for God. They prayed intensively for the grace to turn from their world, comprehensively pagan and frequently violent as it was; becoming a Christian meant a total change of life, a severing of bonds and hopes in the world, and the intensification of the new relationships in the Church. They gave alms, using the transition from a materialistic way of life to cancel their links with greed and cruelty, and to make friends with the poor as Jesus did. They were regularly exorcised, and as the spirit of this world was commanded to leave them, they underwent the anointing of their eyes, ears, nose, lips, and hands, to “seal the doors” against the return of the spirits of evil.

The beautiful fact is that the catechumens did not travel this path alone. Their sponsors and teachers, their priests and deacons, and at last the whole Church wanted to accompany them. In this we can see that Lenten penance was from the beginning a generous thing, a community reality. The whole Christian body was celebrating its life, as the moment of Easter rebirth approached, and the night of Baptism.

We too live in a world centred on self, or on individual selves, and the gratification of selfishness. So many are enslaved in its treadmills, selling their lives for the privilege of spending a bit of money, trying to find salvation by refining selfish motives. We are infinitely weary of this deal, and find no “peace for our soul” in it. We need to make our way back to the font, to the place of our rebirth, where life is still given to us, in our thirst, by *a fountain of living water, springing up to eternal life*. If we could fast, pray, and do works of kindness in Lent, expressly to bring this sad world back to the love of God, we would be entering into Lent with the generosity which it first inspired. Then it would be a joyful, generous fast, giving life and hope, a new spring.

Fr Philip