

Lent

The season of Lent provides for forty days of fasting. It lasts longer than forty days: there are in fact 46 days counting Ash Wednesday and Holy Saturday. You can see at once that the six Sundays of Lent cannot be kept as fast days: no-one can fast on the weekly solemnity of the Resurrection.

Most people seem to confuse Lenten penance with things like New Year's Resolutions, traditional good intentions that come unstuck. They also get mixed up with much more secular realities. *Fasting* gets mixed up with *slimming*, for instance, or the resolve not to drink or smoke, all of which may be a very good idea by themselves: but they aren't Lenten penance unless they form part of a whole programme of training. Training in Greek is *ascesis*, and those who are in training are called *ascetics*.

How does fasting work, and what is the rest of the training like?

The first thing that happens if you fast is that you get hungry, feel empty, and start to look around you with a certain anxiety. Where is your next sandwich coming from?

Most people discover that if they persist in fasting, their body gets used to making do with less; but the alertness doesn't diminish. Quite the reverse. You stop yearning for the cream doughnut fairly early, if you've been firm and accepted in your mind that it isn't going to come. But the sense of incompleteness and emptiness actually continues to deepen. You are beginning to get back a sense of longing, an awareness of desire.

There is actually a great deal of pleasure to be derived from the presence of desire. This is because we enjoy *gratifying* our desires. If we refuse the gratification, the desire grows greater; if we refuse it specifically – as when we turn from a whole programme of action or way of life – it fixes on something greater or deeper, and desires that instead. Desire is part of our nature and, like love, it will find a way.

Spacecraft on their way to planets do not blast their way through the solar system on the power of their take-off engines. Instead, they use the attraction of the planets they are passing as a kind of space-ladder, riding briefly towards the neighbouring planets, and then striking off, once more out of orbit, to the next. So we can use the passing attractions to empower our journey, on condition that we know how to evade their pull when it ceases to be of use.

Fasting and other sacrificial penance works like that. Lent is, if you like, the moment when we break the hold of the orbits that have ceased to serve our long-term project. When we have broken the pattern of continuous feeding of our needs and wants, we are back in touch with the deeper forms of desire. The body, which is habitually kept quiet by the different soothers we're used to applying to it, begins to remind us of its presence. Space opens inside us, and the emptiness of our being begins to echo, and resound. You only know about this if you've done it.

It's terribly important that, when these things begin to happen, you start to pray more deeply, and in this way enter into the spaces you're opening up. Fasting isn't just a mode of inflicting misery on ourselves: it's a most precise piece of training. We have to understand, and actually experience, the link between the growth of

desire and the calling on God. The hunger in our very depths, usually concealed behind the peckishness and vague thirst we constantly satisfy, is laid open. When it is real and perceptible, we can offer it to God, and say the psalms: this is Psalm 62.

O God, you are my God, for you I long, for you my soul is thirsting. My body pines for you like a dry weary land without water; thus I gaze on you in the sanctuary, seeking your strength and your glory .

For your love is better than life itself; my lips will praise you. Thus I will bless you all my life; in your name I will lift up my hands: all my longings fulfilled, as with fat and rich foods, joy on my lips, my mouth full of praise.

On my bed when I think of you, I muse on you in the night watches, for you have been my help; in the shadow of your wings I rejoice, my heart clinging to you, while your right hand holds me fast.

That sort of language, that sort of attentiveness, are the fruit of the sort of training that Lent is. This prayer springs from a heart which has fixed its longing on God, and a body that is left in waiting for the same reward as the heart. What the penance has done is to unite the whole being, body and spirit, mind and heart, and recruited the whole of it to the work of prayer, the searching for God. The result is a unique seriousness in the believer, that comes from a specific kind of integrity: the whole person singing together. The words I am using now are the keys to the concepts of our retreat: *prayer, integrity, turning to God*.

So far, I have spoken about a deeply personal, interior series of experiences. But Lent isn't an individual experience, but a communitarian one. We do it together, and share the way. One of the main ways we do this is by the third form of Lenten penance: we used to call it *almsgiving*, or *works of mercy*, which sounds old-fashioned: I prefer to call it *generosity*, or just *giving*. Its presence in the Lenten triad makes it clear that it has an organic relationship to the fasting and prayer. This goes in both directions: we give out of the fasting and prayer, in the sense that by being less selfish and less self-indulgent, we can find more to offer to others; but the giving also moulds the prayer and the fasting, in that by drawing nearer to others in kindness and sympathy, we have a stronger impulse to pray and fast, which both deepen our selflessness.

I think it is very important not to think of Lenten giving as a merely fiscal reality. Those who have plenty of money really need to unload some during Lent; but we have many more effective ways of giving than the financial ones; time, increased sympathy, making ourselves listen better, respond better, deny our habitual blind-spots and pet hates, revisit dead ends and people we had written off, apologise, ask forgiveness, reinstate those we had dismissed, rebuild the tumbling walls of the human house. It isn't hard to see how these manifestations of holiness are directly linked to effective prayer and real fasting. It is demanded of us that our faith be connected with our living. I think we sometimes go for the results without having done the training, trying to heal the world without becoming clean of its disease ourselves. This is the path of the do-gooder, whose good deeds are their own reward, and who have their reward already. Such generosity is self-resourced and self-regarding, and it is incapable of changing a selfish world.

If you take away any one of the three keys of Lent, the others fall down. Prayer introduces divine scale to the enterprise; we are not just doing something humanly desirable, but reaching for the divine life to which we've been called. The fasting is

essential in setting selfishness aside, and making the vital space in which we can be changed. None of this is valid unless it is set to work in the Church and the World.

I suggest that we make a special effort, this year, to mark the beginning of this Lent on Ash Wednesday as well as we can. The Mass in the PB chapel is usually fairly full. I think we should do our damndest to share it as widely as we can, and shake out the whole community to welcome this positive, generous season, which leads us from winter into spring, and newness of life.