

THE THING STRIKES BACK

Lenten Penance, Fasting, Self-denial

What on earth do they mean?

This Thing is a counterblast to dualism, one of the greatest heresies - which we are still trying to tackle after almost 2,000 years of effort. (You could be an unwitting adherent of it.)

What is the miserable heresy of dualism? Dualism interprets all reality through two quite independent primordial principles. *Philosophical dualism* is well represented by the influential Frog *René Descartes*, who thought there were two irreducible principles in the world - mind and matter (though he held that one God created them both, which makes them thankfully less than primordial). Real *theological dualism* believes that there are two Gods, a good God and an evil God, who are locked in struggle against each other. People have formally stated their belief in this interpretation of reality, and others have ganged up on them and threatened them, and made the world even more unpleasant for them than their beliefs already had. Many Manichaeans, Gnostics, Albigensians, Cathars, and Bogomils came to a very sticky end. But setting fire to heretics does not destroy heresies; and these heresies aren't dead. They're alive and well in all who hate, disparage, or undervalue the realities represented by bodily reality. We must love what God loves: and out of love God creates and resurrects bodies.

In orthodox (correct) Christian doctrine there is a sort of dualism that separates God and the created universe, and draws a distinction between soul and body. But the perfection of the redemption is that *in Christ all things are reconciled to God*.

“In Christ” in that formula means “in the mystery of Easter”; and it is towards that mystery that we are journeying in the great Fast of Lent. So we should try to draw out the reasons why we are led to prepare for the Resurrection of the Body by Penance, Fasting, and the curiously-named “self-denial”. There is something mysterious here that needs understanding.

Fasting - not an invitation to hate the good gifts of food and drink. Throughout the Bible, and above all in the Gospel, these are vehicles of love, charged with the symbolism of life itself, and ultimately of the love of God that shows itself in the Incarnation (the choice of bread and wine for this meaning is Jesus' own, and it is not coincidental). Fasting brings us to the experience of deeper realms of hunger than the normal daily experience can provide. Hunger and thirst are two of the body's horizons, or question-marks: they can lead us into the experience of ourselves as human beings. We habitually shorten their span by a rapid satisfaction of their demands, so as to get on to some other track. In fasting we refuse this instant gratification, and in deepening our hunger we test the realm of desire, and allow ourselves to experience our *need*, our *dependency*, our *weakness*, the degree to which we are not self-sufficient. We sound out the depth of our longing, to discover the deeper realities which lie - we believe - behind physical desire. This is not Iron John self discipline, certainly not the building-up of self-regard by “mastering the body”. The body is not a mere machine to be enslaved to the mind (as your theological dualist would have it). It is a part of our nature, and it has its own way of longing for God, which can serve us well during Lent.

Fasting might, obviously, be done out of *contempt* for the body and its needs. But this would be a veiled attempt to destroy the body, a tacit admission that it deserves to be outlawed in favour of the spiritual realm. No redemption involving the Cross would have been required by this

theology; Waco, Texas would better express contempt for the body than the healing, feeding, gathering, and suffering ministry of Jesus. *Anorexia nervosa* could be construed as an extreme form of such fasting: the acting out of a conversion-hysteria - visiting on the body a symptom which is thought acceptable (i.e., slimming) because there is a deep disease that cannot be openly admitted (hatred of the body, self-hatred). You can die of dualism.

Self-denial is a form of words equally open to the worst possible interpretation. *The self* is a person made in the likeness of God; we love people when their personality is opened to us, we love them "for themselves". We can't understand "self-denial" as *killing the self*. This would be suicidal, and would not echo the loving partnership between a human being and the Creator: "Whoever loves the Father must love the child He begets". However, there is a way of putting the self at the heart of the universe, of measuring the value of all things against my own agenda, comfort, and convenience, which ultimately imprisons me in a private world, and robs me of the sharing which is my entrance into life. I believe that "laying down your life for your friends", which Jesus says is the highest love, begins with the acceptance of this truth. There is no private path to human happiness; it is a gift which has to be given to us by others. No-one who has experienced this could return to the search for self-centred existence. Paradoxically, it is when we give ourselves for one another that we most perfectly fulfil ourselves; and this is as true of the martyr - whose self-giving is refused and punished by others - as it is of the lover who is loved in return. What they have in common is the real sense of self-denial: they both refuse to treat their own self-interest as their ultimate value.

The acting-out of this truth in *small* ways - accepting inconvenience to be of service to others, not insisting on our prerogatives and rights, learning to live peacefully with annoyance and frustration caused by innocent others, and so on - can train us for potentially *great* acts of altruism - such as the pardoning of major offences, the bearing of colossal burdens, the offering of huge sacrifices - which can turn a life from mediocrity into sanctity.

Penance is the desire to turn our lives around towards the face of God. It is experienced as a turn not less than 180 °. (Trivial steering adjustments don't count in Lent.) Remember that this "conversion" is a conversion to resurrection. In order to rise from the dead you have to *be* dead, and *acknowledge* that you are. Penance flows *only* from the full realisation that *I am dead*.

Well, am I dead? I've come to believe that there is in the heart of every person a grave, in which they lie imprisoned by death. On the surface there is a chute down which more and more life is emptied. It leads directly to the grave in the heart. In the grave is the person God created me to be, whom I have failed - even refused - to be. Beside him lie the people I have betrayed or who have hurt me and remain unforgiven. Also buried there are all the hopes I have killed off for myself or others, all the possibilities I have smothered, all the truths I have denied. The longer our pagan, self-serving lives go on, the more we invest in the grave.

Repentance means going with the Christ of the Lazarus story (John 11) to this burial-site, and weeping for our dead life, and for those we have lost and buried here. It means seeing the *anger* of the Son of God before my grave, and it means the readiness, at his command, to *take away the stone*. Christ has no fear of the corruption which is to be expected: *Have I not told you that, if you believe, you will see the glory of God? Take the stone away!* This degree of repentance is what is asked of us in Lent, if we are seriously to expect Easter to mean what it should.