

Ash Wednesday 2009

Isaiah 58 vv 1-12 p744, Ps 51, II Corinthians 5 v20 – 6 v10 p1161, John 8 vv 1-11 p1073

If most people have heard of Lent at all, they probably think of *giving something up for Lent* – probably some item of food such as biscuits or chocolates. I'm not sure that this has much credibility. We might ask ourselves how we should become better people if we gave up some minor indulgence for forty days or why we should imagine that it would please God if we went without confectionary in the weeks leading up to Easter. Indeed what most Christians give up for Lent, if they give up anything at all, is hardly heroic. Millions of people in this country go without far more sweets and biscuits in pursuit of a more attractive physical body than we do for any spiritual benefits associated with Lent. Some Christians endeavour to combine the two. Giving something up for Lent adds a spiritual dimension to the struggle to slim down from the Christmas splurge in time to enjoy Easter Eggs with a clean conscience.

I am intrigued by the fact that it is so natural to use the phrase *clean conscience* when talking about dieting. People do seem to feel guilty about their body mass index, whereas it has become much harder to talk about conscience, guilt and sin in a moral or religious context. The person who ate too many cream cakes, the glutton, has sinned, even in her own words, but we are hardly allowed nowadays to use the word *sinner* to describe someone guilty of any of the other moral failings formerly known as deadly sins: lust, greed, sloth, wrath, envy or pride.

Anyway, I think it would be more helpful to focus not on *giving something up for Lent*, but on Lent's original purpose. Lent is getting ready for Easter. First, Lent is preparing to be baptized at Easter. In the early Church, candidates seeking Baptism were mostly adults. Having expressed a desire to become members of God's Church, they embarked on a lengthy course of preparation. There were bible stories to learn and doctrines in which to be instructed. It was necessary to repent of all sin, to renounce the devil and all his works, to turn to Christ. There was a life of prayer to discover, a fellowship, a worshipping community to become part of. There were spiritual exercises such as fasting. When the Easter at which you were to be baptized was imminent, you entered an especially intensive period of preparation – the period we have come to call Lent.

But why Baptism at Easter? What happened on Easter morning in the early Church? At His Last Supper on the first Maundy Thursday, Jesus did what we are doing now with the bread and wine. He said, *Do this in remembrance of me*. On the first Easter Sunday, having been crucified, having descended into Hell, and having risen again from the dead, He made Himself known to His disciples in the Breaking of Bread. Every Sunday from then onwards was a Eucharistic celebration of Easter. *Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again*. The Church remembers His great love in offering Himself as a sacrifice on the cross for the sins of the whole world. The Church celebrates His eternal presence with us and in us and among us. She proclaims His Death in the joyful anticipation that He will come again in glory and receive us to Himself.

Every Sunday is an Easter celebration, but the greatest of all Sundays is the Sunday that falls with the Jewish Passover – the season in which all these wonderful things actually happened. This is Easter Sunday and, in the early Church, the bishop went out with his people early in the morning (at the time when the women discovered the empty tomb) down to the river to administer Baptism to all those who had come to faith, and to celebrate the Paschal Eucharist, in which the Risen Christ would make Himself known again in the Breaking of Bread. The candidates for Baptism would approach, confess their sins and affirm their faith in the words of the Creed. They would descend into the water to be baptized in the threefold Name. They would come up out of the water and, maybe, be clad in white robes and given new Christian names. The Bishop would lay his hands on them in the rite which would later often be separated from water Baptism as Confirmation. And, as part of the fellowship, as full members for the first time, they would participate in the Easter Eucharist. Even today the Church requires all her confirmed members to receive Communion at Easter.

Baptism is most appropriately administered at Easter because we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus. We Christians are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. We put to death the things of the flesh and the world in order that we may partake of the resurrection to eternal life in Christ. We repent of our sins. We renounce evil. We turn to Christ. We dwell in the Risen Christ and He dwells in us. Baptism, therefore, is both a foretaste and a pledge of what it means for a Christian to die and go to Heaven. In that sense Holy Baptism and Holy Communion – the two Gospel Sacraments, the only rites which Jesus actually gave us to perform – are very similar. They both express what God has done for us, what He is doing for us now and what He will do for us in all eternity. Both Baptism and Communion demand a response from us – faith and repentance as we approach, openness to His Spirit as we participate, a willingness to walk with Jesus as we leave the font or the altar but never to leave the divine presence. A wedding is the beginning of married life when God joins together so that no man may put asunder, but a marriage is and has to be sustained by continuous expressions of the couple's love. In the same way, a Christian life begins at Baptism when we are crucified with Christ, adopted as God's children and given the right to use the family prayer, *Our Father, which art in Heaven*, but this relationship with Jesus has to be sustained by continuous expressions of our love for Him and His love for us in prayer and Sacrament.

So, to cut a long story short, Communion for the established Christian is a restatement of his Baptism, and Easter Communion especially is a restatement of the Christian's baptized status as one who participates in the Death and Resurrection of Jesus and anticipates an eternity of divine love. The Church decided, therefore, that it would be good not just for candidates for Baptism, but for all of us, to prepare for the Easter Eucharist in the season which we call Lent. Later still, it was thought appropriate to fix Lent at 40 week days (Every Sunday is a little Easter!) in commemoration of the 40 days and 40 nights Jesus spent in the Wilderness, after His Baptism and in preparation for His ministry.

So what the Church is asking us to do in Lent is to prepare for our Easter Communion. So the question is, what impairs our Communion with God? What alienates us from God? What cuts us off from God? What divides us from Him? And the answer is sin. It is sin that

divides us from God. It is sin which makes it impossible for us to have Communion with God, to be in fellowship with God, to live in God and to have God live in us. Sin is the great alienator.

What is sin? Sin is failure to love God with all our hearts. Since to love God implies loving other people, sin is failure to love our neighbours as ourselves. You need to ask yourself in what ways you sin. In what ways do you fail to love God and other people? There are many ways to sin – in thought and word and deed, in the things we do and in the things we leave undone. There are many ways to sin, many ways to fail to meet the demands of perfect love. I am sure that you are a unique sinner, as I am. The opportunity of Lent is to review your life thoroughly and to recognise the ways in which you are a sinner – the things you do or fail to do which divide you from the love of God.

You might use Lent as an opportunity to heighten your spiritual perception. You might read spiritual books, pray more, join a fellowship group, come to church more often. You might indeed fast. Some people say that intensive fasting strips away some of the material constraints which hold us back from spiritual experience.

As you strive for perception of spiritual things, you may realise that you are held back, by an excessive materialism. Perhaps you are too fond of money and the things that money can buy. This is where *giving something up for Lent* is a particularly appropriate discipline. Show that you can do without it, whatever it might be!

As you develop a deeper knowledge of God and His holiness you will very likely develop a deeper sense of your own unworthiness, your own status as a sinner. You will acknowledge this to God in your heart. Some people will want to come to a priest and make an auricular confession. Some people will try to have a mental list of the specific things in their lives which need forgiveness when they come to the General Confession in Church. Some people may express their contrition by fasting. As the Old Testament lesson pointed out, it is not so much the means you choose to express your repentance; it is the sincerity with which you repent. If you truly repent of the sins which separate you from God, you will give them up and, as the prophet says, you will set free the oppressed, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, meet your family responsibilities and keep the Sabbath.

It is good to acknowledge our sins. We do not, however, have to be dragged down by them. Jesus has dealt with all our sins by His Death on the Cross. What we have to do is to have faith and to repent. As soon as we do that, they are forgiven. We don't have to worry about them any more. Our Communion with God is restored. Lent becomes a celebration of the eternal life we have as forgiven sinners. The Lenten experience of repentance and confession necessarily brings us into the Easter experience of absolution, atonement and eternal life.

And that is my last reservation about *giving something up for Lent*. We don't finish Lent on Holy Saturday. Lent is an essential and permanent part of our Christian pilgrimage on earth as we journey towards the eternal Easter in the light of the Risen Christ.