

Lent 1C 09/03/2025

For Christians around the world, Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. It was the practice among early Roman Christians for penitents to begin their period of public penance on this day. They were sprinkled with ashes, dressed in sackcloth, and obliged to remain away from fellowship with other people until they reconciled with fellow Christians on Maundy Thursday, the day before Good Friday and three days before Easter, the day of resurrection.

An oldie but a goodie: A man woke up in the morning deeply repentant after a bitter argument with his wife the previous night. He noticed with dismay the crate of beer bottles that had caused the falling out. He took it outside and started smashing the empty bottles one by one onto the wall. He smashed the first bottle swearing, "you are the reason I argue with my wife". He smashed the second bottle, "you are the reason I don't love my children enough". He smashed the third bottle, "you are the reason I don't have a decent job". When he took the fourth bottle, he realised that the bottle was still sealed and was full. He hesitated for only a moment and said "you stand aside, I know you were not involved".

Lent is a season marked by three activities: Prayer, fasting, and the giving of alms. In Lent, we don't just pick a single category- we do all three. This Lent, you might begin each day by saying Morning Prayer or reading our Lenten book or you might spend your meals fasting from meat or dairy, or alcohol or all of them and donate more to the Church or a church charity throughout these 40 days.

All of this sounds relatively doable, but in practice, it's challenging. What's more, it's all pointless unless we also attempt to fast from sin: Fast from giving ourselves over to any of the passions which so often control our actions.

In today's Gospel, we see Jesus in the desert. He has fasted from all food for 40 days, and we are told that he was very hungry! Jesus, in his human nature, is weak with hunger and exhaustion when the enemy comes to him saying, "You're hungry, you have to eat. It's all very well to be highly spiritual, to be contemplative, to be a good person, but when it comes down to it, survival is more important. You've got to take care of number one first. Much better to dispense with all of this fasting, have a good meal, and come back to prayer when you're refreshed and can really focus on it."

From this perspective, loving God and neighbour are like pastimes or hobbies; it's great to indulge in these after you take care of the important things in life, but ultimately, they come last. Be a Christian, but only after you take care of your work obligations, your family obligations, answer all the emails, fold all the laundry, do your gardening and ablutions and then see if you have a little time left for God. But Jesus looks the enemy in the face and says, "No." Man does not live by bread alone. We, in the season of Lent, join our fast with that of Christ so that we can also say no to the enemy that we do not live by bread alone as well.

Your passions may sometimes tell you that you just have to get angry in a moment. You have to respond to the insult, you have to shout down the crazy political ideology, you have to fight fire with fire, to give hate for hate, but in Christ, you have the freedom to say, "No. I may feel angry, but I will respond with restraint and in love."

The enemy may tell you that you have to hoard your wealth, to pile up money to keep yourself safe. He may whisper in your ear, “If you help one person, you’ll have to help others, and pretty soon you’ll have nothing left for yourself,” but in Christ, you have the power to say no and simply give to all who call to you who are in real need.

The voice of the enemy may say-only the giant meal, only a new car or overseas holiday, only proving to others that you are successful, smart, and attractive will make you feel ok, will make your life liveable, will bring true and lasting happiness, but in the Lord Jesus Christ, we find the strength to say no, turn away from our passions, and turn toward God.

In Lent, we want a little treat. We can’t stop thinking about the brownie, the drink, the luxury item that an internet ad dangles before us. It seems like we will go crazy or die if we can’t have it, but we stop ourselves, trust God, and wait to see what happens.

In Lent, we hear the odious comment, the crack-pot idea, the insult and we feel like we will explode if we don’t address it, like we will be permitting inexcusable injustice if we don’t fight back, if we don’t give release to our anger, but we don’t; instead, we forgive, we trust God, and see what happens.

In Lent, we get hungry, we get angry, we meet our friends at a restaurant, see everyone ordering beautiful steaks and glasses of wine, and we are kicking ourselves that we even agreed to come. We are enraged that the only thing we can eat is a \$30 salad! It feels like the world will come to an end if we don’t just give in and do what everyone else is doing, but we don’t; we trust God and we see what happens.

And at the end of our lives, we face death, and the world will be either trying to hide our death from us, telling us that everything is really fine, or will be sobbing for us, telling us that we have now lost everything. Rather than joining in the lament, we simply trust God, give ourselves to God in life and in death, and we see what happens.

For “One does not live by bread alone,” continues the passage from Deuteronomy which Jesus quotes, “but by every word which comes forth from the mouth of God.” We are fed by the Word of God, we live through the Word of God, and it is the living Word, Jesus, who is all that we need. When we worship not food, not wealth and power, not the devil and not ourselves, but God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – we have life and have it abundantly.

This Lent, accept the challenge of prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. Trust God and see what happens.

Fr Robert Newton