

1st Sunday Lent (A)

26th February 2023

'Fasting with Jesus in the desert'

Gen 2; 3: the Fall

Rom 5: *one man's fall brings condemnation ... one man's good act brings life ...*

Mt 4: 1–11: the Temptations in the desert

So, how is your Lent going so far? There are only 36 more fasting days to Easter! 10% of our 40 days of Lent is already over! What are these days of fasting all about? Are we going to take them seriously? Have we decided what we're doing for Lent yet, what we're giving up, or what we're doing as a spiritual extra, or what we're giving to in charity? Or are we 4 days into our penitential season with no decisions yet made? Let's make sure that *by the end of today*, the 1st Sunday of Lent, we've set our hearts on the Lord and on keeping Lent well for His sake.

I always feel that it's incredibly wise of the Church actually to give us a definite *season* for the extra fasting and prayer. In a piece of music there are fast sections and slow movements, exciting passages and more sombre moments. In a film there are action-packed scenes, and tender, reflective exchanges. A piece of music which is all slow and ponderous, or a continuously all-action film, just gets tedious. Likewise, the Church year has its seasons and

its moods. And Lent is the season for penance, reflection, and confession. A spring-clean for the soul! Lent is the time actually to get round to it, rather than keep putting it off till tomorrow. 6½ wks, surely, is the perfect length for such a season — long enough to make a difference; not so long that it's too daunting.

But what's the point of fasting, of giving things up? Surely I can be close to God and still eat chocolate? Surely I can be close to God and still have a drink? Surely I can be close to God and still go to the cinema? Yes, of course you can. But the point is that perhaps you can be *closer* to God if for a season you go without chocolate, or alcohol, or cinema, or whatever it may be — not because the denial makes you a leaner, fitter, spiritual fighting machine: 'look at what I can give up, I'm so disciplined, and able to master myself.' No — but because to go without something simply reminds us that we do not find our fulfilment in the things of the body or of our social enjoyments, even though these can be good things. It is a matter of giving up a good thing, to remind us that there is

a *better* thing. It's the point which Our Lord makes in His riposte to the Devil in that first temptation: *man does not live on bread alone, but on every word which comes from the mouth of God.* We give up a good thing, to show with our very bodies our priority for the thing which is best, *par excellence*, the goodness of God.

Examples of Fasting for you this Lent could include:

- Avoiding **alcohol** (it's a classic, but for some of you this may be an important one);
- Avoiding certain **sweets, snacks**, or comfort food, or fast food;
- Avoiding **meat on an additional day** to Friday, maybe Wednesday each week;
- Avoiding **social media** / YouTube videos for some (or all!) of Lent, or maybe some regular evenings of Lent;
- Avoiding **going out to theatre**, cinema, concerts ... which is something that I have kept to each Lent for several years.

Lent is the desert that we enter in imitation of Jesus's 40 days of fasting and prayer. The desert is a place free from distractions, where one is alone with oneself and with God. Our Lenten desert should try and mimic that in some way — a time in which we free ourselves from some of the usual distractions of life, so as to give some more

thought to the very source of our life, who is God. That's why the best sorts of Lenten penances aren't those which we undertake mostly for health/detox reasons — 'I should really cut down on my intake of such-and-such, anyway!' No, the better Lenten penances are those which also make way for time spent in prayer. Say, for example, we decided to give up using the internet or social media for every Friday evening in Lent, to make it a time for God: half an hour of prayer, perhaps, or an hour of spiritual reading. That would really be Lent in action, wouldn't it? A special Friday devotion which makes a heart hunger for God more than it hungers for the next meal or the next drink or the next YouTube video.

Examples of Praying for you this Lent could include:

- The greatest possible offering of prayer in Lent is to attend **weekday Mass**: if you're not attending a weekday Mass at all, then why not choose a regular day to go? And if you're already going occasionally to weekday Mass, then why not think of upping that a bit, to more days /week? The Mass cannot be bettered! Just think: the Mass includes the chance to: (i) make an act of sorrow for sins; (ii) hear from the riches of Sacred Scripture; (iii) be in the presence of our Blessed Saviour as he offers His Sacrifice; & (iv) in many

instances to receive Him in the Blessed Sacrament of Holy Communion. What could be better in Lent than to have a renewed and deeper relation with the Mass? 5.30pm Mass here weekdays.

— Other important times of Prayer that you are can share in here at Newman House in Lent are the **times of Adoration** (Tues eve 3hrs; Sun eve, 1hr).

— Also the devotion of the **Stations of the Cross** (Fri 6pm), with different sets of meditations each week, exploring the real connection between the Lord's Passion and our daily life.

— **Reading Scripture** meditatively in private (*lectio divina*) is also very profitable, even if it's as simple as taking e.g. St Matthew's Gospel and reading it slowly and systematically through, chapter by chapter.

— **Newman House meditation book** is also a very easy way in to spending some prayer & reflection time each day.

— And then, a real high point for Lent, is the **mid-Lent March retreat** (Worth Abbey); 48hrs out of London in the Sussex countryside in the grounds of a Benedictine monastery; a proper 'time out' for a combination of prayer, talks, silence & social.

Now, another advantageous consequence of undertaking Lenten penances is that we can save money; and that helps feed our almsgiving, the 3rd 'pillar' of Lent. This is, for example, the way CaFOD, our national *Caritas* (Catholic charity), structures its 'Lent fast day': we feed

the poor by giving up some food of our own. There are plenty of ways in which we could imitate this pattern of Lenten action: saving some cash of our own, so as to give to others in far greater need. Even though you're mostly students, reliant on grants and parents, yet it's still important already to get in to the Catholic habit of supporting charities, especially those who give help to the neediest, poorest people in the world. Your education in faith requires of you also a commitment to learn the practical love of neighbour.

Examples of Almsgiving for you this Lent could include:

— Assisting with the Chaplaincy Thursday-night '**SVP**' **soup run**; sign up using the QR code in Newsletter.

— Giving to the **Ukrainian-Rite Cathedral appeal** for food parcels for families in need this winter without their homes or livelihoods.

— The **CaFOD fast day** (this Friday, 3rd March), with the intention of fasting from some food to give that money to CaFOD's work in developing countries.

— The DEC appeal for the **Syria/Turkey earthquake**, or Aid to the Church in Need, which is collecting for the same crisis.

— And there are *countless other ways* that you can think of, perhaps favourite charities of your own, to benefit those in need.

All this helps us in our primary Lenten task which is to be spiritually refreshed for the highlight of the Church's year. And to be really ready for Easter requires us to be free from our sins. So, all our Lenten exercises of fasting, prayer & almsgiving are geared towards that. Our fasting removes some of the usual preoccupations so that our heart is less filled with things that are less important; and our extra prayer sheds more light into the nooks and crannies of our heart where we often hide ourselves from God and cling on to our sins. We shall talk more about Confession later in Lent, and its absolute necessity for a good spiritual life; but for now do be aware of the usual Confession times (Sunday eve & Monday eve) here at Newman House, and the extra Friday-evening slot in Lent.

Our whole celebration of this First Sunday of Lent is an understanding that the giving-in to the devil's temptations which went on at the beginning of human history is undone in the overcoming of the devil's temptations by Jesus. We don't need to hide from God as Adam and Eve did, in the garden of Eden, having sinned.

Jesus has come and walked right into the devil's territory amongst us, and in that stark desert encounter has shown us that sin and evil can be overcome ... *has been* overcome. Lent is our chance to be there in the desert with Him, supported by Him and sharing with Him in this victory over sin and death. We don't need to be guiltily crippled by our sins, just open to His power to love and forgive, and to take up the offer of His forgiveness this Lent. With the great Lenten weapons of Fasting, Prayer, & Almsgiving we are all the stronger to do battle with sin; and we are all the more ready and willing to receive the sacramental grace of forgiveness from the Victor, Jesus, in Confession. This Lent, therefore, we can really be close to Christ: by spending this Lent making concerted efforts at being in His holy company — consciously taking Lent seriously — we shall be ready to rejoice at His glorious Victory on Easter morning!