

## Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Advent 2008 (Year B)

This Sunday I will draw to a close my brief series of addresses on traditional Catholic devotions by looking at practices concerning times, places and things. As I have written the homilies over the last few weeks I have been very conscious that in the time I have I can only give a very partial account of a huge subject, and there is much that I have had to leave out. That is more true this week than ever, and so I want to focus on just a few particular areas. As in past weeks, my reason for talking about these subjects is that they form a part of the Catholic landscape; they are a part of who we are - or they should be. Because our Catholic practice in recent years has become so focussed on the mass, which is quite rightly the central part of our Catholic life, we have lost touch with so many devotional practices which would help us live each day more authentically, more really: practices which make us more truly human. It is in the spirit of recovering some of these that I continue with this series of homilies.

Some years ago, when it was first suggested that shops should be able to open for business on Sundays, a campaign was organised called 'Keep Sunday Special'. Quite what difference it made I'm not sure, but the fact that we are all here makes it clear that, at least for us, Sunday still is special; but what about Friday? In what way is Friday different from any other day of the week? Even in my firmly protestant school we always had fish to eat on Friday, but I suspect that there are very few people now who think of Friday as any different from any other day: except Catholics. We were never obliged to eat fish on Fridays, merely to abstain from eating meat, but that has all gone now, hasn't it? Actually, no. All Catholics aged between 18 and 59 are obliged to fast, that is to reduce the amount of food they eat, on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. All Catholics between 14 and 59 are obliged to abstain - that is to give up some type of food or drink - on Fridays throughout the year. In England and Wales these rules are slightly changed, but every Friday (that is, the day Our Lord was crucified) we are obliged to do penance. That is, we are obliged to undertake some external activity that impacts on our life in some way, as a way of showing that we have turned towards God, that we will take control of our own lives and we will not allow our behaviour to be governed by our

feelings or our passions and desires. A Catholic Friday should be different from every other day of the week. It is a central part of our Catholic practise - not an optional extra, to mark Fridays off as different by abstaining from meat or from some other food, or from alcohol, or by fasting, or by some act of charity to the needy that we would not otherwise have done, or by going to mass, or praying the stations of the cross. On a Friday Our Lord died for us, and we are called on to make that great sacrifice a part of our everyday life; we should live as people who can never forget that God loves us this much. Living in constant awareness of this will profoundly affect the choices that we make, and the whole direction of our lives. Fridays offer us the chance to remember how dependent we have become on material things; how difficult we sometimes find it to control our desires and wants; and to remember for a short time what it feels like to be hungry, something that millions of our brothers and sisters elsewhere experience every day. The Friday penance is not just some external 'rule' to be obeyed, but a powerful witness to the power of the gospel to change lives. This would be a very good time for us to rediscover the authentic value of Friday penance.

While we are on the subject of food, something that is essential for all human life, can I also suggest that, if we do not already do so, now would be a time to rediscover saying thank you to God for our food. It does not take much to begin our meals with a thanksgiving grace. The traditional words are printed on the newsletter, but there is no reason why you shouldn't make one up for yourselves, or let your children do so. This is another chance to remember, day by day, all those people who have no food at all, as well as praying for our families spread throughout the world and all the people who we care about. Sitting at our table we strengthen our ties with other people by bringing before God not only those who we know and love that are eating elsewhere, but also those who will eat nothing at all that day.

I have talked already about the saints, and God's call to each one of us to strive for holiness. But it is not only people that can be holy; objects and places can be holy too, that is to say, set apart as signs of God's living power. That is why we go on pilgrimages to places connected with the life of Christ, such as the Holy Land, or of his saints, such as

Rome, or apparitions of his mother, such as Lourdes. Sometimes we can scoff at some of the stories that surround holy places, but what really matters is that they bear witness to centuries of prayer and devotion. They are a powerful corrective to our arrogant idea that our generation is so clever, so advanced. These places remind us of an older, deeper wisdom that challenges the certainties and the scepticism of this age, and as we walk to roads trodden by the saints we realise that we are called to do in our age what they did in theirs. Their faith was alive and powerful, and it changed the landscape of their world; how are we doing? Perhaps this is the moment to mention the Stations of the Cross: we cannot all travel to Jerusalem, but we can all walk the Via Dolorosa, the road through the city that Christ walked. This is something we usually do in Lent, but not exclusively. It is for everybody, not just for the pious or the really really religious. Christ carried his cross for us, so wouldn't it be a good idea, just now and again, for us to walk beside him? Will that not help me understand more fully what he really did, and also understand what the people around him (his mother, the disciples, the women of Jerusalem, the soldiers, the bystanders) felt? In doing so, will this perhaps help me understand more clearly the suffering that many people go through today, because in a sense the Way of the Cross, Christ's solitary journey into suffering, is the pattern of every human agony.

Things can be holy, too. Holy water is just water, of course, but it is also a reminder of my baptism and so it tells me every time I touch it that I am destined for eternity; a wedding ring is just a strip of gold, but it speaks to me of love and promises given and received, and that love empowers and emboldens me in my daily life. We are physical beings, and these physical things help us to remember eternal truths. There is always a danger of turning faith into an intellectual exercise, all about words and thinking, but that makes it less human, and so less real. We need to hold onto these physical things which are tangible signs of unseen realities.

I could talk for hours: I could talk with you about daily prayers, about examining our conscience, about the healing power of regular confession and a great deal more that would bring to life our Catholic faith. Perhaps, though, I will end with mentioning one final idea, writing for yourself a Rule of Life. This can be very simple, just a few short

sentences that will give a framework to your Catholic life. Left to our own devices we naturally tend to do as little as possible, and to find excuses for inactivity. When we make a definite commitment to try and achieve some defined objective, it is harder for us to put off doing things for another day. You might include your daily prayers - what will they involve? Will you come to mass more often than once a week? Will you visit the Church to pray in front of the Blessed Sacrament? Will you learn more about the saints, and come to love them more because they love Our Lord? Will you learn some of the traditional prayers to Our Lady? What will you do to pray for the dead? What will you undertake by way of Friday penance? What acts of charity and almsgiving will you undertake? How often will you go to confession to receive forgiveness for your failures and grace to help you in the future?

Only you can answer these questions, because what is suitable for one person at one time in their life is quite wrong for someone else. But what is clear is that, if we are serious about our Catholic life we must offer to God the whole of our life, not just an hour at the weekend.