

## Homily for The First Sunday of Lent (Year B) March 1<sup>st</sup> 2009

So here we are, ten per cent of the way through Lent and ready to ask ourselves what we have to show for it all so far. It would be quite possible for us to feel rather disheartened already – somehow we forgot it was Ash Wednesday, or we never quite got around to making any resolutions for Lent, and it would be tempting to admit defeat and just carry on as normal. Well, if we haven't yet quite got around to working out how we plan to make use of Lent then clearly that is not ideal, but there is still plenty of time to redeem the situation. One of our greatest problems is that we approach this season with the wrong attitude completely. We look at Lent as an ordeal that we have to endure, something that is imposed on us from outside almost with the intention of making life more difficult. If that is our approach – even if that is what is going on subconsciously, then Lent is bound to be a disappointment to us. In fact, this season has a much richer and more positive meaning.

The word which we use in English to describe this season, Lent, derives from an Anglo Saxon or Germanic word for Spring. The season always coincides, more or less, with the season of Spring, but there is more to this use of the word than just that. Lent is not just Spring in the calendar, but more importantly it is a period of springtime for all of us. Lent is a great gift which the Church gives to us to help us rediscover our true selves: to help us cut our way through all of the distractions and delusions that conspire to confuse our lives, so that we can rediscover those things that really matter, and put them once more at the heart of our lives.

So, the first point about Lent is this: Lent is not a time of misery imposed on us from outside to stop us doing the things that we want to do and to make our lives unhappy; Lent is a great and wonderful gift that is given to us to help us distinguish between the things that really matter, the things that are capable of giving us real, deep and lasting happiness, and those things that masquerade as important, but which in the end leave us feeling empty and unfulfilled.

The next mistake that we need to try and avoid is the idea that Lent is about making us feel miserable and guilty about our sins. It is absolutely right that God wants us to use this as a time to be more aware of our failings. But this is not about making us feel bad about ourselves. Christ waits for us in the desert not in order to berate us like an angry schoolteacher for our failings, but he waits for us as a friend who wants to set us free from the power of sin. So, the second point about Lent is quite similar to the first: Lent is not about imposing new and alien restrictions onto our lives, it is about allowing Christ the Healer, the friend of sinners, to help us see those things that really enslave us, those passions and desires that we find it difficult to control, so that he can then lead us to conquer them and become free. Let me take a rather trivial example to illustrate this point. Imagine that I am a complete chocoholic; I cannot see a chocolate bar without eating it. Not only will I become fat and toothless, but I am not free; I am not in control. My mind tells me that this is wrong, but it seems to be overruled by my passions and my feelings. I have become a slave. The Lent fast allows me to see just how much I have lost control of my life; it helps me to form a real desire to retake control, and because I know that millions of other people throughout the world are grappling with their own problems and their own passions, I am able to walk beside our Lord in the desert asking him to help me take control of

my own life once more. I have used a rather trivial example to illustrate the way in which fasting for Lent is about retaking control of my own life. If I am able to overcome the habits of the past, I reach the stage where the decision to eat a chocolate bar is taken by my conscious mind, not by the physical passions that I am unable to resist. But the same principle applies to other aspects of our lives too. We could lose control of our lives to watching the television, to eating too much, to sex, to computer games, to acquiring or to spending money – so many things. One of the questions that the Lent fast, the simple idea of giving things up for Lent asks us, is, ‘what aspects of my life are out of control?’

The traditional practices of Lent, prayer, fasting and almsgiving, invite us to rediscover our humanity. Prayer reminds us that we are not alone, that in all we do God is our friend and our guide. Our laziness and self-indulgence, even our arrogance, that makes us decide we can do without prayer diminishes our humanity; we become less truly human, so we inevitably become less happy. Lent invites us to remedy that. Fasting helps us to discover those areas of life where we have lost control. Human beings are created to be free, so we are less truly human if we have surrendered control, and Lent helps us rediscover our humanity. Almsgiving is a reminder that God’s generosity knows no limits: sharing all that he has is a part of the nature of God, and so it is inevitably also a part of our nature too. Whenever we are tempted to be mean, to hold back, we are being less than human. So the third point about the season of Lent is that it is given to us to help us become more truly ourselves, more deeply human.

Finally, after his time in the desert Jesus returns to preach the Good News. We must not lose sight of the fact that Lent is good news. It seems to me that there are two fundamental approaches to religious faith: we can either use it to bolster and justify all our prejudices, to give us an excuse for doing exactly what we want to do anyway; or we can use it to challenge all our own feelings and prejudices, to challenge our ideas and our habits. Lent is our opportunity to commit ourselves to the latter approach. It is very easy to accept those bits of our faith that allow us to carry on just as we are, but to turn a blind eye to the ones that challenge us. Let us commit ourselves to choosing a more full-blooded approach to our faith. Let us make this Lent the time when we really finally do something that we have known we should do for ages: come to mass more often; go to confession; give up a habit that we know is bad; say the rosary; pray the Stations of the Cross; give a gift to charity; make up a quarrel – the list could go on and on. Perhaps this could be the year that each one of us does just one thing that we know is right, that we know in the end will make us happier, better people, but which somehow we really do not want to do. I think I’ve quoted before this saying from St. Josemaria, but in fact it is worth repeating every year:

***“I have decided not to let this Lent go by like rain on stones, leaving no trace. I will let it soak into me, changing me. I will be converted, I will turn again to the Lord and love him as he wants to be loved.”***

(From ‘The Conversion of the Children of God’ in Christ is Passing By’)