

**“We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.”**

***2 Cor 6:1***

And so begins the forty day fast. Even though Lent begins almost as late this year as it can begin, nonetheless it still seems to have come round again quickly, doesn't it? Since last Ash Wednesday we have seen the full cycle of Lent and Passiontide, of Easter and Pentecost, of Corpus Christi and of the green Sundays throughout the summer and the autumn, and of Advent, and Christmas, and the Epiphany. Now, as the days begin to lengthen and spring seems just around the corner, we enter into the most solemn and penitential season of Lent. Indeed, our English word 'Lent' comes from the Old English word, *lencten*, which means spring. (In Latin, Lent is known as the season of Quadragesima, which means forty days.)

Lent is a solemn season, certainly, but as we have just heard in the Gospel passage, we should not walk around with gloomy or unsightly faces, letting everyone know we are fasting as the hypocrites do. Rather, Our Lord exhorts us to anoint our heads and wash our faces so that no one might know we are doing penance. Our religion does indeed involve ceremony and ritual, laid down by the Church at God's command, but our private devotions are between ourselves and God alone. God, and only God, is to be the judge of our virtues.

And in the same vein, it is only God who will see whether we take full advantage of the superabundance of blessings and graces made available to us during Lent, especially during Lent in a Holy Year.

Through that special remembering of events which we call *anamnesis* the various episodes from the history of our salvation – in particular Christ's birth, His death, and His resurrection – are not just recalled, they are actually made present to us, or rather, we are made present to them. Whenever we celebrate Christmas, the graces of the Incarnation are

poured out upon the whole Church once more as they were two thousand years ago. Whenever the feast of Pentecost comes round, the face of the earth is renewed once more with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit afresh. Whenever we assist at Mass we are made truly present at the Sacrifice of Christ on Calvary.

By the same token, a Holy Year is a special memorial of Our Lord's act of atonement on the Cross when all sins are forgiven and debts are washed away. A great cause indeed of jubilation! It is with this in mind that we know Lent in a Holy Year to be especially awash with grace, the graces and merits of Calvary made new in our own day. A Holy Year does not just celebrate the work of our redemption: it actually makes us present at – and participators in – that work of redemption!

More than at any time since Lent twenty-five years ago – when we last celebrated a Holy Year – we have the chance to call upon graces that are renewed by Almighty God and made available to His people once again.

It is in this context that the Church cries to us in the words of St Paul: 'We appeal to you,' he says, 'not to receive the grace of God in vain.' In other words, do not waste this all-too-occasional opportunity to stand beneath the waterfall of God's graces and be washed clean of sin and debt. A window is open onto the blessings of heaven: allow the light of God's mercy to pour into your soul this Lent.

'In a favourable time I have listened to you,' says our God in the Book of Isaiah. 'And in the day of salvation I have helped you.'

Well, '*now* is the favourable time; *now* is the day of salvation.'