

“Always abounding in the work of the Lord.”

1 Cor 15:58

Today is the last Sunday before Lent begins, and we do well to pause and consider what this season means and how we might observe it.

Lent is a time of preparation for the greatest feast in the Church’s year, the resurrection. But Lent is not only a period of preparation for something else: it is also a season in its own right. Indeed, it is the most important season of the year because during Lent the whole Church across the world focuses on what is truly at the heart of our holy religion. The Son of God came down to earth to save us from sin and the consequences of sin, and to call us back to a life of virtue and holiness instead. He came to remedy our state of alienation from our God, and to reconcile us to the One who created us to know Him, love Him, and serve Him in this life, and to be happy with Him forever in the next. He came down to earth to put right what we, through our sins, had got wrong.

The only time Our Lord gets angry in the Gospels is when He encounters religious hypocrisy and comes across those who claim responsibility for teaching others the ways of God but who do not practise it themselves. For the rest, He has nothing but compassion, mercy, and tenderness. Again and again, Our Lord reaches out and touches, with the gentleness of God’s healing hand, the lives of those in most need: the sick, the sorrowful, the lonely, the abandoned, and those in pain.

Yet for all that it is God who makes the first move, still we are bound to respond by rising up and following Him: His compassion demands of us a response, and it is during Lent that graces are made especially available to us to help us make a fitting response and to meet those demands. Lent is the one time in all the year when we are particularly called to

turn again from the complacencies of our lives and stir up in our own hearts a fire of love for God and the things of God.

More than anything else, we are called during Lent to turn from the conveniences, the comforts, and the pleasures of this life through the three disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

How we adore the conveniences of our lives! How we strive to make everything in our lives fit our own plans so that everything is as we want it to be! How annoyed we become when things do not go our way! How much effort we put into making ourselves the centre of our own world!

This is what the discipline of prayer can correct. Prayer – the raising of the heart and mind to God – is the perfect, indeed the only, antidote to our self-centredness. In prayer, God becomes the focus of our attention. It is in prayer that God may be given once more His rightful place at the centre of our lives. Whatever upsets our over-sensitive sensibilities it is prayer that can help us regain a proper sense of proportion and re-establish our equilibrium.

And then, Oh! how we idolize the comforts of this world! How we worship our own personal comfort! How out-of-sorts we feel whenever we are not comfortable, either in mind or body! What lengths do we not go to in satisfying our longing for consolation and comfort! Do we not ordinarily say ‘yes’ to anything that we think will add to our comfort?

Fasting is the antidote to this particular poison. Not fasting in order to save money so that we have something to give to the poor! That would be to confuse fasting with almsgiving! No. The Lenten discipline of fasting is about denying our bodies especially, but our minds as well, the comforts of material goods. Fasting is about learning to say ‘no’ to self so that we may more readily say ‘yes’ to God. Fasting is about emptying ourselves of self so that we may be filled and satisfied instead with the presence of Almighty God.

And my goodness! How alluring do we find the pleasures of this world! How we love its pomp and vanities! How we adore everything that distracts us from the things of God, that keeps us preoccupied so that we do not have to pay attention to greater matters! How we rejoice in the accumulation of the goods of this world and in the sensations and delights that this world has to offer!

Almsgiving, the third of the three disciplines of Lent, is the medicine for this particular sickness. To give alms not out of what we have left over but from the pockets of our own needs. Do we dare to go without something so that others might have what they need? When we give alms, dare we imitate God's superabundance and show to others the extravagance that God has first shown to us? Can we give without first counting the cost?

In a Holy Year the special graces of Lent are even more abundantly made available to us by God because each Holy Year is specifically a recalling and a making new once more of Christ's sacrificial offering of Himself on the Cross. If we would be conformed to the likeness of our Redeemer, now – this Lent – 'is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation' (2 Cor 6:2).