

Sermon Notes for Lent 1

when he had fasted (gospel)

We do not know *how* Jesus fasted (but he was hungry). Sometimes, for example in Daniel, we have an account of what was not eaten or drunk. Sometimes in the history of the Church there have been rules for what can be eaten and how much of it, and also for who is required to fast. But such rules can hardly be said to have authority in Anglicanism (or even modern Romanism!). There was a time in the Church of England in which fasting remained an important discipline (and let it not be forgotten that Charles the Martyr was a fast day, not a feast) but that was while the security of the state was believed to depend on such observances. The Gospels are probably rather uncertain about fasting anyway. It seems to be the case that many references to it are not in the oldest manuscripts but added in the imperial edition of which the “*textus receptus*” is a corrupt version. And Jesus said that fasting is unreasonable while the Bridegroom is with the disciples. But surely he is now with us always! Nevertheless, he declared that there will be a time when the disciples will fast, and such religious observances are at times practiced by Paul. We do find them in the early Church.

The earliest keeping of Lent itself is the last and most serious stage of the preparation for adult baptism. Its duration has more to do with the teaching to be given to the candidates than any attempt to find forty days. Later, it is the last and most serious stage of the reconciliation of excommunicate penitents. Other Christians might have chosen to fast alongside the catechumens or penitents. But we are unlikely to have any of these. The transforming of Lent into a *general* discipline (at a time when everybody was a Christian) and its mathematical extension to forty days (it is wrong to fast on Sundays) is quite late. That does not of course make it wrong; not all late developments are corruptions. But it does suggest that we should be clear what we are undertaking.

Token “giving up something for Lent” will not bring us nearer to God (though perhaps this is right for the elderly or sick who could not keep a serious fast anyway). More serious fasting or abstinence (technically fasting is about consuming less, abstinence is about type, for example to abstain from meat) would be a serious spiritual discipline, though the confusion with dieting is unhelpful, and we must be careful not to inflict physical harm on ourselves.

Taking on something for Lent it is not the same as fasting. It used to be a respectable discipline – the reading and studying of “Lent books”, for example. It might assist our life with God, if the book is any good (which probably now means that we have to find or re-read old books). It is possible to take on extra prayers for Lent; but this could easily become mechanical. The mere quantity of prayers will not bring us to God. Better do our ordinary prayers more carefully.

Lent is not in itself about charitable giving or other works of mercy, though prophetic teaching about fasting does couple it with giving to the needy. That said, giving is a Christian duty at all times and we should be systematic over the whole year. But specifically Lenten giving is not wrong. All these cautions, and then perhaps temptations annexed! Yes, Christianity was never an easy calling; we are offered only the strait gate and the narrow way, and few there be that find it. So much the more our need to be careful.

The idea of following Jesus in his earthly ministry is a sound instinct and the Church came to build on it in giving us Lent. But we are not first century Jews; there is no wilderness to hand; we have many secular duties which we should not neglect. And more basically: “We fast by way of penitence, and in order to subdue the flesh. Our Saviour had no need of fasting for either purpose.” (Newman) Jesus' mission from the Father was unique and so had to be discovered, not least in the countering of the three temptations; our duties are more routine and so more easily discovered; our temptations are different. He found his vocation in the wilderness; we would probably be running away from ours if we tried a simple imitation of his behaviour.

Christ “has blessed fasting as a means of grace, in that He has fasted; and fasting is only acceptable when it is done for His sake. Penitence is mere formality, or mere remorse, unless done in love. If we fast, without uniting ourselves in heart to Christ, imitating Him, and praying that He would make our fasting His own, would associate it with His own, and communicate to it the virtue of His own, so that we may be in Him, and He in us; we fast as Jews, not as Christians.” (Newman)

Lent is not an end in itself. The end is resurrection and the victory over sin; Lent is only a wise step on the way to Easter.