

Quinquagesima

All chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous, but grievous, yet afterwards it yieldeth peaceable fruit unto them that have been exercised thereby, even the fruit of righteousness. (Hebrews XII.11).

This is a sermon about how to prepare for Lent and to spend it profitably.

It is almost impossible not to start with today's Epistle. But I want to start by turning it round - to appreciate first God's attitude towards us, and only then how we should bring our attitude to Him into line.

God displays nothing but faith, hope and charity towards us. This may seem strained. The point about faith is that God is utterly trustworthy and reliable. That is what "Amen" means; we can depend on God. The point about hope is that God has a purpose and a programme for us, if we will let Him; He wants to make something of us, and He looks forward to the achievement which He makes possible. The point about charity is that this faith and hope is exercised in us - God reaches out to help us get there.

Some obvious cautionary points. None of this is because we deserve it. We don't. Nor are we anything special, except perhaps in that we do not avoid Him, but are willing to play our part in the relationship, the communion.

And nothing in this promises us an easy life. Indeed, the opposite. The epistle to the Hebrews makes it very clear (Hebrews XII.5-8) that "*whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth*". Fathers (at least then) discipline their legitimate children; they do not bother with the illegitimate. So if the Christian religious seems strenuous, that is evidence of our Sonship.

So the first call upon us, as ever, is to spend time giving thanks to God for his care for us. And that call holds good at all times.

But next, we learn from I John IV.10-11 "*Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.*" We have the duty to respond - and respond is all we can ever do, for God was always there first.

We respond to God's faithfulness by trust: in him completely, even when it is difficult; even when the burden seems impossible.

We respond to God's hope for us by our willingness to learn and to grow.

We respond to God's charity towards us by our own response to Him, by accepting His help and making something of it.

These are called the "theological virtues" because they are directed towards God first; but if we take God seriously, then we will also direct them towards other people. What we have received, we must share.

So the second call upon us is to review our lives in the light of these duties. Lent is a good time for such review, though the call holds good at all times. How do we need to change? What evil habit have we allowed to grow? Whom have we wronged, that we should seek to repair the damage?

The third call is to learn from the first two calls what resolutions we should make. Christians do not wholly despise "New Year Resolutions", but our new year, for this purpose, starts at Easter.

And just as God disciplines us, so we need to discipline ourselves. "Giving something up for Lent" is a sound religious practice: "*ye shall afflict your souls*" (Leviticus XVI.31). Not to the point of self harm, but certainly so that you notice, preferably daily, the indulgence you are denying yourself. Lent is a bracing time, and the Bible frequently assumes that prayer is supported by bodily fasting.

Lent is not of course an end in itself. It exists only as a preparation for a more important time, the Easter season, when we try, if only for a few weeks, to live wholly in the light of what God has taught us in this season.

The sermon relates to the Epistle for the Sunday