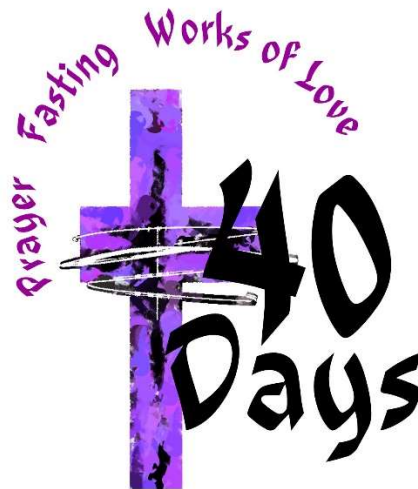


Home Retreat – 27th Feb 2021 – Lent / Penance



Each year, during Lent, many people opt to “give up something.” Why? What’s it for? Does it help us become better Catholics? How do our little sacrifices relate to THE sacrifice that Christ made for us on Calvary?

Join Fr John for this week’s Home Retreat at 11am where he reflects on Lent – How do our little sacrifices relate to THE sacrifice that Christ made for us on Calvary?

bit.ly/2z65LY5 #TogetherInPrayer

I’d like to begin these reflections on penance with a poem by **Robert Herrick** (1591-1674) who lived in the 17th century:

To Keep a Good Lent

Is this a fast, to keep the larder lean? and clean from fat of veals and sheep.

Is it to quit the dish of flesh, yet still to fill the platter high with fish?

Is it to fast an hour, or ragg’d to go or show a downcast look and sour?

No, ‘tis a fast to dole thy sheaf of wheat and meat, unto the hungry soul.

It is to fast from strife, from old debate and hate, to circumsise thy life.

To shew a heart grief rent, to starve thy sin, not bin,

and that’s to keep thy Lent.

A few years ago, I was given a book on Lent by Ann Widdecombe called "Sackcloth and Ashes." It dealt with the place of penance and penitence in what she called a self-centred world. For many people penance, like religious practice in general is a great mystery. In her introduction to the book she describes a familiar scene. Lent is looming and the same journalists who ring up public figures to enquire about New Year's resolutions are now ringing her to enquire about Lenten resolutions. She told the reporter who contacted her that she was giving up everything except water to drink - no alcohol, no tea or coffee or even fruit juice - just water.

She said that two questions then usually followed: how much weight did she expect to lose and what would she spend the money on which she had saved. She said each year she went through the same rigmarole, explaining that it was not about weight or saving money, it was a penance. She said: "Drinking a glass of cold H₂O on a freezing February morning while all around you are gulping their cappuccinos and espressos is a penance." "Oh, that must be hard," was the usual response. To which she replied, "not as hard as Calvary" "Pardon? Said the reporter" "It's meant to be hard, she repeats. It's a penance."

For many people it is hard to understand the meaning of penance or Lent in general - even the weekly Lent that Catholics are encouraged to keep: not eating meat on Fridays. What's that about people ask. I once overheard a conversation between two nine year olds during Friday lunch when I was teaching in the prep school at Gilling Castle. It was fish & chips (fishy Friday they called it - it was very popular). The conversation went as follows: "why do we always have fish and chips on Fridays?" "Don't know" said his friend, "perhaps because it's fried - you know Friday - fried fish..." "No," said the first boy, "it's something to do with Jesus... perhaps it was his favorite supper!" When I told the abbot, he said I had a lot of catechesis to do! Indeed, to make a connection between fish & chips and the sacrifice of Jesus on Good Friday may not be immediately obvious to the uninitiated - especially when you're only nine!

As you probably know, for most of our meals in the monastery we don't engage in conversation - we listen to someone reading to us. Recently, we have heard several books talk about "the Me culture" or the "me generation" where the sole goal in life seems to be to seek rewards in money, celebrity, and comfort. Everything has to be immediate, from credit card sales to e-mails and texts. No waiting. Everything has to be now. Patience is no longer a common virtue - yet without it true penance is impossible. As Ann Widdecombe says, "To be penitent involves a pause amidst the madness, time for reflection and for self-examination." That is what you and I are trying to do. That is what Lent is all about...about waiting on God.

Penance can be an outward sign of inner grace - the grace of growing closer to the Lord. It is not that we can work out our own salvation. Because Jesus died on the

cross for us, our sins have been wiped out. It was a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice. No suffering of our own can add to it, yet as we voluntarily embrace a tiny share of his own suffering, it brings us closer to him, part of our on-going conversion or as Benedictine monks say, part of our “*conversatio morum*.” Penance is an answer to sin.

Penance involves several stages. The first is **repentance** – we have to be truly sorry for what we have done or said (or not done!) that was sinful. Without true sorrow, penance is meaningless. To repent is to be aware of Infinite Goodness compared with our own often mediocre lives. It is to recognize one’s own selfishness. Thomas Carlyle said: “Repentance is the most divine. The greatest of all faults is to be conscious of none.” It demands the humility to see ourselves as we really are beneath the loving and forgiving gaze of God our Father.

Then there is **Reparation** – we have to try to put right what we have done – restore a reputation, give back money that was stolen (or donate an equal amount to charity), apologise for losing your temper... Whether or not something is a penance depends on motivation: giving up food to lose weight is not the same as fasting to do penance in solidarity with the poor.

After reparation comes **Resolution** – to try, to aim not to commit the same sin again. Without this penance becomes meaningless, just an outward show. Even if we fall again in the future the aim is important. Mother Teresa said that we are not called to be successful but to be faithful. Part of Lent is learn to pick ourselves up again when we have failed in our resolutions and to carry on the journey, not to give up, like Judas Iscariot, but to turn and try again – like St Peter.

As I said, Christ’s death on Calvary, his sacrifice is fully sufficient to heal us from our sins. In one sense our acts of penance are superfluous. Yet Christ’s enormous penance, his suffering, on our behalf in all its physical, mental and emotional anguish, does not end penance but rather makes salvation available to the penitent. Repentance, reparation and resolution and penance are still the appropriate responses to sin. They enable us to be open and receptive to God’s healing and forgiving grace.

To quote Ann Widdecombe (page 61): “*Therefore during Lent as we prepare both for the sacrifice of Calvary and for the celebration of the Resurrection by enduring some trifling penance of our own, we should perhaps look beyond the nails, the scourge, the crown of thorns, the thirst, the muscles aching with the unbearable pain of the weight of the body, the jeering and mocker – and instead think of what appeared to be the greatest let down of all time and of its utterly deliberate nature. Then we might reflect that it was carried out not by an angry young revolutionary but by a man who was all compassion, all caring, who understood suffering and who identified with the poor and oppressed.*”

To Mary at the foot of the Cross and to the disciples and all those who had followed Jesus, it seemed he had failed. Part of Jesus’s suffering was knowing that’s how they

felt, that he was adding to their suffering. Yet by that act he carried out the will of his Father and achieved our salvation.

We can never atone for our sins or make a sacrifice that can make up for the wickedness of mankind. Only the sinless one could do that. Our penance does not diminish Calvary but is our way of, in a small way, sharing in it.

Another element is **forgiveness**, the willingness to forgive those who have offended us is part of the process of penance. To be forgiven, we must also forgive. "without our own willingness to love our neighbour enough to forgive, we cannot reach the final stage of penance which is **reconciliation**." (page 105). The father forgave the prodigal son, the unforgiving debtor was punished, Pope John Paul II forgave the man who shot him. Can we learn to forgive also...?

Penance is not just about suffering, making life difficult for ourselves, but about hope, healing and happiness, not just in this life but in eternal life.

The idea of penance is that it focuses our attention on God and away from ourselves – at least that's what it's supposed to do. It helps make space for God That's why Lent can be joyful – even when we are doing penance – because we are heading in the right direction. I remember once having to read the whole of Dante's Divine Comedy for an essay. One of my abiding memories was of the people, the penitents, slowly climbing the Mount of Purgatory, carrying the weight of their sins round and round and higher and higher, but they were happy, joyful, because the end was in sight, they were heading towards the Beatific Vision and that made everything worthwhile.

I suppose that's why St Benedict in his Rule says that, for monks, life should be a constant Lent. I don't think he meant that we should be miserable all the time – quite the opposite! But it should be a constant effort of trying to move further towards God. Nevertheless, in the monastery we do keep the season of Lent in a special way: each one has to choose some extra prayer (like the Stations of the Cross or more Lectio), has to give up something like cheese or coffee or alcohol and also to have a special Lenten book. All these things are to deepen our relationship with God – which is what Lent is all about and what the whole Christian life is about. Being human we get used to things – so we need seasons to change and to focus on different aspects of our spiritual life and on the mysteries of God.

The one time when penance is almost second nature to us is when we are children. Imagine a parent telling off one of their children: "Johnny, that was wrong. Say sorry to Jenny and give her back her toy. Don't do it again." If you think about it, that little exchange involves recognition of wrongdoing (that was wrong); confession of fault (say you're sorry) atonement (giving back the toy) and amendment of life (don't do it again). A child would grow up insecure if such admonitions were not forthcoming. "When the toy is returned and Jenny smiles, it is all over and, usually,

Johnny is soon smiling too – a small joy from a small penance!! No wonder Jesus tells us to be like little children!

I'd like to conclude with a quotation from a former abbot of Ampleforth, Cardinal Basil Hume:

"Now it is a fact that my spiritual life is more a wandering in Blunderland than a resting and relaxing in Wonderland. I would guess that most of us would say the same of ourselves... What matters, however, is that hearts and minds should be involved in the search for God, where the seeking and the finding go hand in hand. It is the process of getting to know God and learning to love Him. It is intimacy with God that we seek. We try to go beyond every experience of knowledge and love, which we have now, to another experience, which is beyond our grasp but not entirely out of our reach." (Basil In Blunderland – 1977)

Searching for God. That's what monastic life is about. It's what every Christian life is about. It is what Lent is about!

So, keep searching and have a happy Lent!

Let us pray:

Loving Father, we are now in the holy season of Lent. We begin to realize anew that these are the days of salvation, these are the acceptable days. We know that we are all sinners. We know that in many things we have all offended Your infinite majesty. We know that sin destroys Your life in us as a drought withers the leaves and chokes the life from the land, leaving an arid, dusty desert. Help us now, Lord, in our feeble attempts to make up for past sin. Bless our efforts with the rich blessing of Your grace. Make us realize ever more our need of penance and of mortification. Help us to see, in our ordinary difficulties and duties, in the trials and temptations of every day, the best opportunity of making up for past infidelities. Every day we are so often reminded in field and wood, in sky and stream, of Your own boundless generosity to us. Help us to realize that You are never outdone in generosity, and that the least thing we do for You will be rewarded, full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and flowing over. Then we shall see, in our own souls, how the desert can blossom, and the dry and wasted land can bring forth the rich, useful fruit that was expected of it from the beginning.

We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.