

Lenten Hope

This Home Retreat explores how Lent can help us to overcome our inner dividedness and strengthen our hope in God.

Lent, as of course we know, is a time of renewal, a time of preparation for us, so that with God's help we can be ready for the celebration of Easter, that we may be taken deeper into the mystery of Christ. It is a season in which we might try to take a little more time to pray with the Scriptures, to read spiritual books, and to reflect upon our relationship with the Lord and through Him with one another, taking all of this to God in prayer. It is a time that, if we use it well, will take us to the heart of what it is to be a Christian, to a deeper understanding of the meaning of our baptism by which we were clothed in Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit, this relationship with the Lord constituting the fundamental reality of our life.

Lent, then, is a season of hope.

The value of our Lenten observances is that they can help, as St Benedict says, to 'wash away the negligences of other times.' It is not that somehow by a supreme effort of the will our abstinence simply washes away our sin – and dismantles any other obstacles that from time to time we place between ourselves and God – but rather that in making a few acts of self-denial we make room for what is deep within us to well up, namely our desire for the Lord – a desire for Him that springs from our nature created in the image and likeness of God and thus for a relationship with Him, a relationship, then, which is actually the fulfilment of all that we are, all that we have been created to be. St Benedict teaches that we might give up something of the food and drink we would normally have, a little of our needless frivolity, perhaps something of our sleep, and to offer these to God 'with the joy of the Holy Spirit.' The value of these acts of self-denial is that when undertaken in prayer, they make room in us for the Holy Spirit to draw us closer to God, to form us ever more into the likeness of the Son, as we journey towards the

Father, the joy we experience being the result of this, the result of being on a journey towards fulfilment, the result of owning ever more fully our identity as sons and daughters of God.

As we journey through Lent in this way, then, and come to understand better the life to which we are called, we experience more intensely those aspects of our life that keep us from God – because we begin to see them more clearly for just what they are. We recognise with greater clarity the sort of temptations to which we are subject and also the damage that is caused – to others, to ourselves and to our relationship with God – when we give into them. This should lead not only to repentance (‘prayer with tears’, as St Benedict says), but to earnest prayer that with God’s help these internal divisions that we experience may be overcome. The monastic tradition speaks of this as coming to singleness (or purity) of heart.

In the Gospel, Jesus reminds us that ‘if a household is divided against itself, that household can never stand.’ The context, of course, is that some scribes had accused him of driving out devils by the power of the devil himself, thus failing – even refusing – to see the presence and work of God among them. In his exorcisms, Jesus was indeed tying up the strong man, not to burgle his property, but rather to cleanse and heal those who had fallen under the devil’s sway in his quest to undermine faith and the building up of the Kingdom, in his desire to diminish hope. The scribes had fallen into his trap, accusing the All Holy of evil, blaspheming against the Holy Spirit in their wilful denial and rejection of God.

What the devil really wants, of course, is for us to lose hope – to begin to despair, so that faith in God’s saving power is weakened as we become lukewarm and indifferent to it, and our love is undermined with the result that our inner dividedness is exacerbated and anger and grudges are nursed, even cherished, the consequent rancour leading to detraction and division among those who by means of their baptism are called into communion with God and through Him with each other. It is a subtle strategy – as was that of the serpent’s – the specific sins that

we commit both inflicting particular damage and undermining our relationship with the Lord.

In contrast to this, St Peter in his First Letter provides us with the antidote to this poison: ‘Simply reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts, and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have.’ As St Benedict teaches us, ‘the love of Christ must come before all else’ – Christ our Saviour, Christ our Redeemer, Christ our Way to the Father, Christ in whom the fulness of life and love is to be found, as under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we make our pilgrim way to the Father and thus into the heart of God Himself. And for this we must have hope, not a vague optimism that things will all work out well in the end – without God they won’t – but rather a living and real personal trust in Christ as our Way, our Redeemer and our Saviour, Christ the life of my life. It means being willing to let go of the various ways of thinking and acting that have become habitual to us and keep us in our rather confined comfort zone, even if it is not always that comfortable, as our various limitations and sins that constitute our unwillingness to see God at the door and to let Him in actually prevent us from thinking and acting freely. Rather, we must allow the Lord to expand our horizons, as we learn to trust Him ever more deeply and to invite Him into our every moment and experience: genuinely to live with Him, actively to seek to live our life with Him, and thus to renew our freedom to live in Him. This is what improves our life by aligning us with God. Lent is a time for taking this seriously and is thus also a time for earnest prayer.

Fundamentally, then, we need to allow the Lord to kick away the props and the crutches that, paradoxically we might think, cause us to stumble on our journey, preventing us making real progress, and allow Him the freedom to be our Guide. Of course, we know well that we cannot do this unaided – that in this life we will never manage this completely – but if progressively we can give ourselves up to Him in prayer, asking for the necessary generosity to do this, then our growth into Christ, our transformation into those people God has created us to be, and

constantly wills us to be, will continue; and we will flourish. This is how our inner dividedness is overcome and our hearts are made whole.

Christ, then, is our hope; and if we are able truly to live with, in and for him, this will change our lives, will free us from all that keeps us bound. Hope in Christ is not the same as the optimism we experience when something goes well, when, for instance, a good family discussion or an individual conversation or an encouraging event fills us with a sense of what is possible; hopes founded on passing things will sooner or later disappoint, however good these things may be. Hope, rather, is an expression of humble faith when we place our trust solely on God. When we do this, we no longer simply hope for a better future measured in human terms, but actually allow God in Christ to make a difference to our experience of the present. What makes life better – more real, more Christian – is allowing the Lord to rearrange us, so that the conversion that He desires to work within us results in our recognising that Jesus is with us now at every stage of our journey, at every step, filling each one – if only we will allow it – with His presence, His peace, His love, His forgiveness, enabling us to forgive and to love others with His love. Such a way of living brings harmony and blessedness, not division and despair; it is the way of hope and of Christian freedom; and it is the way to singleness of heart – actually, to real blessedness – when during Lent by our observances we try to make room for God to conform us ever more closely to the image of His Son.

We must pray for the grace to live like this, since to live like this would be transformative of ourselves, of our families, of our friendships and of the communities to which we belong, as Christ would be truly active among us. Thus, it would be a testimony to Christ, to life in him, and to the salvation he brings. With St Peter, we know that Jesus is the reason for the hope we have within. By God's grace, may this Lent help us truly live what we profess and believe.

Suggestion

Read St Benedict's chapter on Lent below and consider how this Lent might be a time for allowing yourself to be drawn closer to the Lord.

The life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent. Since few, however, have the strength for this, we urge the entire community during these days of Lent to keep its manner of life most pure and to wash away in this holy season the negligences of other times. This we can do in a fitting manner by refusing to indulge evil habits and by devoting ourselves to prayer with tears, to reading, to compunction of heart and self-denial. During these days, therefore, we will add to the usual measure of our service something by way of private prayer and abstinence from food and drink, so that each of us will have something above the assigned measure to offer God of his own will *with the joy of the Holy Spirit* (1 Thess 1:6). In other words, let each one deny himself some food, drink, sleep, needless talking and idle jesting, and look forward to holy Easter with joy and spiritual longing.

The consider the following questions, taking any responses you have to God in prayer:

- Where do I most need the Lord in my life?
- What makes it most difficult for me to allow Him into these areas?
- Can I simply entrust myself to the Lord as I am?
- What would real hope look like for me?