

Blessed Lent to you all. The tradition of the forty days of Lent is an old one in the Christian Church, dating back to around 300 AD. So really, even before the Bible was codified, Christians were already observing this forty-day period of Spiritual reflection, in preparation for Easter Sunday. Originally, Lent was devoted largely to a period of time during which the Bishop would instruct those who were being prepared for Baptism at the Easter Vigil.¹



Image from Wikipedia

If you listened carefully to the readings for Ash Wednesday, you will see that the focus, particularly regarding the Gospel passage from Matthew is about not **what** we do in our lives, but **why** we do the things that we do for our witness to the Gospel. No action, or prayer, or alms giving can truly glorify God unless the act is accompanied by the right motive. And that righteous motive can never be to glorify ourselves. Otherwise, all the alms-giving, and prayer, and pious acts in the world are meaningless.

Joel's call to the people is not just a call to sincerity, but also a call to new perspectives and priorities. What is important to you in this life? And why does God permit his much loved children to go through so much adversity? How can it be for any other reason except to change us? Note how in verse 14, Joel encourages the people to repent and return in truth to their compassionate God. But what are they to find if they do indeed make this transformation of character. We read that they may indeed find blessings, which are in the form of offerings to The Lord God. Now this is strange! We are to repent and renew our faithfulness to God so that we can get that Maserati we've always wanted, right? We are to get right with Jesus, so that promotion we think we're so entitled too finally comes our way, right? No. Not at all. Joel says that for the faithfully repentant, God will grant us His grace by enabling us to leave an acceptable offering to God. This is one of those times when the Old and New Testaments seem to perfectly dove-tail together. You see, the Old Testament Saints had a clear understanding that the most exalted destiny of God's child was to be able to provide an offering to God that was glorifying to him. The purpose, the manifest destiny of the Children of God as a nation was to bring glory to The Lord.

That's why Joel prophesies that the faithful and repentant Priests of Israel will implore God to spare the people, not for their own sake, but so that the rest of the world would know that Israel's God is the God who reigns. The priests implored God to save the nation so that the rest of the world could not take a scornful position with regard to the Lord. Israel was to be an enduring testament to the power, and sovereignty of God as ruler of the world and above all other Gods.

This is, in fact, the realization which comes to the redeemed when we realize our aim is not to please ourselves but to glorify God. And the mercies of God which are in fact new every morning are thus renewed so that we, too may make of our own lives an offering acceptable to the Lord, a pleasing fragrance to The Lord, to clearly demonstrate to the world the victory which was and is and will be in the Lamb who was slain, the Lamb of God who even now reigns victorious with the Saints in the New Jerusalem. We live no longer to ourselves, but to and for Christ in whom we live and move and have our being. So, you see, this desire to live unshakably in the will of God to bring glory to Him has always been at the very core of the human being. But it is only in the victory of Christ and the coming of His Holy Spirit that you and I can finally, completely, and forever provide an offering to God truly acceptable in his sight, lives that actually bring glory to His name.

¹ Henry Chadwick, *History of the Early Church*, (Penguin Books, 1993) p. 259.

In the Gospel reading for this Ash Wednesday, we have the strange choice of our Lectionary, which has us read about how we are to conduct ourselves with regard to fasting and piety. It is a strange arrangement since the Lectionary leaves out verses 7 through 15 of Matthew Chapter 7, which are some of the most important verses in the Bible. For it is in these verses which the Lectionary excludes from this today's reading of Matthew Chapter 7, it is in these eliminated verses that Jesus teaches His Disciples the words to the Lord's Prayer. But, if you pause for just a moment to think about what today and the next forty days are all about, it's actually a really logical exclusion for our Lectionary to make.

Because the words of The Lord's Prayer are words of comfort. They are familiar words. We don't have to think a lot about these words in order to recite them. So, in The Lord's Prayer we find comfortable words. But today and the next forty days are anything but comfortable. In fact, they're not supposed to be.

Because Ash Wednesday and Lent remind us that God isn't just some over-lenient grandparent who is willing to simply close an eye to our faults and let our sin slide. He is the God of absolute holiness, and indeed the void separating sinful man from the Holy Lord God is vast – certainly a valley much too wide and too deep for us to cross by our own, feeble, human means. The trip through such a dark, deep valley would be impossible, were it not for that precious gift of the blood of the Cross.

Lent is a time to take stock of this vast difference between Holy God and sinful man, and to then dwell in humble wonder on the fact that such an awesome God would send His only Son to die a horrible death for the likes of you and me. And with that realization in mind, how can we possibly feel anything else but a sense of being absolutely and utterly humbled. That's what Lent is really about.

It was probably the reason why St. Athanasius, an early Bishop in the Church introduced Lent into the Christian calendar in the 4th century. This early Church father Athanasius was impressed by the austerity and simplicity with which many churches in the western Mediterranean were practicing their faith in Christ. And shamed by the incredible opulence which had developed among the Church's clergy and worship services in his native Alexandria, Athanasius established Lent as a means of shedding some of this opulence, and getting back to the basics of following and worshiping Christ. Lent, you see, was originally established to re-instill in Christians that sense of humble wonder at the infinite and undeserved mercy which God so lovingly rains down upon His sinful children. It's all about feeling and being humbled before Our Lord. Lent is about humility.

It's also about coming to terms with the fact that, yes, into every Christian's life some rain must fall – in fact, quite a significant amount of precipitation actually. And Paul is under no illusions concerning the challenges that await the faithful Christian. In the epistle to the Corinthians that we read this evening, Paul writes about his ministry and its afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger. He was intimately familiar with all of these hardships.

But did you notice the note of victory at the end of this passage from 2nd Corinthians, when Paul talks about Christians as people who are treated as impostors yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and yet alive, as punished and yet not killed, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing and yet possessing everything."

And that's what Lent is all about too, because at the end of this period of self-denial, of giving up something or taking on something else, at the end of this process we are made to realize just how very blessed we are as children of God. And then, with that humbling realization comes indescribably joy.

So, whatever you do this Lent, let me encourage you to seek these moments of being humbled by the infinite grace and love of Our Lord. In your moments of quiet, go and sit at His feet. Look wonderingly up into His beautiful face, and be once again humbled by the infinite love that He has for you. If you do this, you will truly have a Blessed Lent.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. JWB+ 02/23/17