

Sermon Lent I 2006

So again we are at the start of Lent. How should we keep this season? What should we do? Well, don't be seduced by the newspapers and magazines which, if they refer to Lent at all, make it the opportunity for going on a diet. *So that you'll look nice and trim for your holiday* – on some godforsaken celebrity sand dunes. Do not confuse dieting with fasting. The diet is just another aspect of the generalised self-obsession, and pampering me-ism that now passes for spirituality almost everywhere. Fasting is different. It's not that chocolates or beer or sticky puddings are bad things. But fasting is a demonstration of the truth that even good things, even the best things, should be set aside for a while to help us concentrate on God.

This is the whole point of Lent. It is to be used to help us draw nearer to God. Traditionally, this is the season of *Give up and take up*. Give up a pleasure and take up a devotion. There's lots you can do easily. Come to one of the weekday Masses on Wednesday or Friday. Come to the Monday evening Devotions session. Look in your Prayer Book at the Psalms and you will see that at the top of every page it tells you which Psalms are set for which days. Say them morning and evening and in a month you've read the whole of them – some of the most powerful and helpful poetry ever written. It needn't even take up much extra time – you can read them in the bath or on the loo.

But Lent asks some basic questions. What do we mean by *drawing closer to God*? And why should we want to do this? Because being near God is all delight. It is what we are here on earth *for*. God is our origin and our destiny. In his beautiful prayer St Augustine said, *O Lord, thou hast made us for thyself; and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee*.

And the thing about giving yourself to God is that you don't lose anything: you get yourself back – yourself clarified and enlarged. Once you start to give yourself away – to give yourself to God – you become who you really are. In God's wacky spiritual economy, the more you give yourself to him the more *you* you become. It is a shift in perspective. We are used to going round with self-consciousness. What we need to develop instead is God-consciousness.

Put your mind on to God and give your heart to him, and that way you will avoid being strangled by introspection. We all have this little person in our head. We all talk to it a lot of the time. It's talking to yourself. It's putting self-awareness at the centre of life. Wrong from the start. The aim is to shift this psychological-spiritual orientation so that we feel the reality of God at our centre.

But we quite like ourselves, don't we? Why should we want to get rid of self-consciousness – that constant awareness of sweet little me? Because in fact it's not that sweet. Self-consciousness easily generates into self-obsession. At its best self-consciousness is a jabbering in the head; it's a worry; it's an endless self-assessment. Mankind is always tempted to put himself at the centre. And for the last century – since Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis – we have been taught that this perpetual inward gaze is what we should be doing. It isn't. That man ought to be known as Sigmund Fraud.

Think about something else. Look outwards. Why do you think creativity is so admired and desired? Because it is a high grade way of taking yourself out of yourself and putting yourself into something else. The escape into creativity. Only it's not an escape – it's making a gift of yourself. It's what God did when he made the world. And creativity should not be understood only as the business of high art. Any movement outwards, away from the soliloquising self, is an act of creativity. Not just *The B-minor Mass* but *Who sweeps a room as for thy laws makes that and the action fine*.

This thing about drawing nearer to God. It's because God is lovely. He's not the schoolmaster or the VAT man. He's not sitting up there judging you, adding up your vices and virtues. The language about judgment and hell is simply a description of life without God at the centre. God doesn't send us to hell. But unless we are centred in him, we are in hell already. God doesn't want that.

What does God want? He wants to show us his love. He wants to fill our hearts and minds with his love. He is full of love, overflowing. You know from human relationships that unsurpassable joy – even if it is fleeting – of being in love, of loving and knowing you are loved in turn. This is how it should be between us and God. And not fleeting, but forever. God is in love with us and he invites us into a love affair with him.

There is nothing Schmaltzy about this. It's not sentimental. For the way we love God is through our *will*. We love God by obeying him and serving him. And not, as William Blake thought, because God is *the Great Nobodaddy aloft farting and belching and coughing*. Not because God sternly demands our obedience. But because obedience to God is the whole meaning and purpose of our existence and all our happiness. That's what *blessed* means in The Sermon on the Mount. Your blessedness, your happiness, your good – that's what God wants.

As I said, it's not sentimental. It's personal. And it's more than personal. For just as a man can destroy himself through sin, so a whole society and nation can be destroyed if it turns away from God. Our society faces destruction – I'd better say that again, you might think it was a slip of the tongue – our society faces destruction from two directions: our own internal decadence and the ambitions of a rival culture which is aggressively confident and committed to promoting its way of life. I'm not talking only about so called *terrorism*. The ordinary devout Muslim despises us for the way we have turned from our faith and followed a decadent and trivial way of life.

It is not too late. Just as each individual man can be saved from his sins by the Lord Jesus Christ, so a people and nation can be restored if it returns to God. But we have to wonder if the corporate will exists. We shall not be saved by the hedonistic consumer culture of celebs. We shall not be saved by sentimentality and *chestnuts roasting by the open fire*. We shall not be saved by the Last Night of the Proms – or even by Harrison Birtwistle and Damien Hirst.

We shall not be saved by high art and by the supposed *cultural treasures of our heritage*. Man does not live by museums and art galleries alone but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. For our intellectual and artistic achievements are at bottom the product of Christian civilisation. If we let Christianity go, the lot

goes and us with it. Or as T.S. Eliot put it more eloquently: *Such achievements as you can boast of in the way of polite society will hardly survive the faith to which they owe their significance.*

So what's the answer? It's simple and plain. We must actually believe the Christian Creeds. We must pray. We must receive the Blessed Sacrament. We must centre ourselves on the truths of God. In a word we must return to him. We must do this here in our church of St Michael. In our homes, our places of work. And we must let the whole nation know what is at stake – not in some apocalyptic future, but here and now. Tell them all what the score is.

Turn ye then, and ye shall live. Although we have sinned, we have an Advocate with the father, Jesus Christ the righteous and he is the propitiation for our sins.