

In ten days' time it will be Lent again, so we might as well think for a few minutes about how best to keep and use this season. Mention Lent, and people immediately think of giving something up. The point about this is you must give up something you really like. It wouldn't be much of a sacrifice for me, for instance, to give up rock music for forty days and forty nights. Quite the reverse, I could give up some things forever. Hell, they say, goes on forever. My idea of hell would be an everlasting Glastonbury Festival, compete with mud and occasional guest appearances by John Lennon.

There are problems about giving things up. If you give in to temptation and fail, you'll feel mortified, abject. It can be worse still if you succeed, because then you might start to feel smug and self-satisfied. Giving something up for Lent is not to be confused with dieting or improving your looks, your sense of well-being or that disgusting *self-esteem* all the life trainers say we should be full of. The whole point of Lent is to turn away from self and to look to Christ. Anything which distracts from that outward gaze should be avoided. So, if your abstemiousness makes you concentrate more on yourself and your feelings, then abstain from abstemiousness.

We need not only to give something up but to take something up. Nature abhors a vacuum. The devil finds work for idle hands. Hell is a void. I recommend you read a bit of St Mark's Gospel every day in Lent. The Bible isn't meant to be there as a doorstop but to be used. Chesterton tells a story about his grandfather who used to walk about carrying a Bible all day on Sundays, though he had no intention of going to church. A friend asked him, *Why do you do it, Chessie?* He replied, *I do it to set an example.*

Read St Mark. How long is it since you read that brilliant, sparse, fierce, sparkling mini-biography of the Son of God? Read it again. You will be surprised to discover how much of it you had forgotten. Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Collect for the Day. Thoroughly memorise the Collects. For the only things you really know are what you know by heart. Read a Psalm each day. This way you will build up a spiritual hinterland. I can tell you, being able to recite to myself a Collect or a Psalm has got me through many a bad night.

The Gospels in Lent are the story of Our Lord's slow procession towards the Cross. If you come and hear these Gospels each Sunday, you will be following in Christ's footsteps, catching some of his pace, learning to feel something of his dedication. Understanding more keenly his love for you and just what he gave for you. Come and sing the hymns. This Way of the Cross starts with the wilderness hymn *Forty Days and Forty Nights* and culminates on *The Green Hill Far Away Where I Survey the Wondrous Cross and His Sacred Head Sore Wounded*.

Lent is there to help us become more Christ-like, if only a little. You can't do this in the abstract. You can't ask for the essence of Christian doctrine and philosophy to be set before you and then make a mental decision for or against. You must imbibe the particulars of the faith. Your faith should be something that's in your bones and sinews – not just in the mind. And the Christian faith is a matter of practice. Precisely: you know the phrase *the practice of religion*. It means just that. Why don't we understand this as we should? You would laugh at the absurdity of someone who claimed to be able to play the piano expertly without ever having learnt or practised. Paderewski said, *If I don't practice for*

*one day, I know it. If I don't practice for two days, the critics know it. If I don't practice for three days, the audience knows it.* Or, as Dr. Suzuki puts it, *Only practise on the days that you eat.* It's the same with your religion. It's not just for Sundays. It is, as the Lord said, *our daily bread.*

So practise fasting, practise learning the Collects, practise reading St Mark's Gospel. Think of this as an actor thinks of learning his part. The Greek word for *actor* is *υποκριτης* – a hypocrite. Someone who pretends to something until, by dint of perseverance, he achieves and becomes it. This is the way recommended by St Augustine: be a hypocrite for Christ's sake – that is, pretend to be good until you actually become good, or at least a little less bad, a little better. The good news is that one can drift into good habits as well as bad ones.

All this is not about improving morally, pulling yourself up by the bootstraps. Keeping Lent is not about trying to placate an angry God. It is about sharing a little in Christ's sacrifice. Why should we do that? Because it is only when we approach him closely enough to feel a little of what his sacrifice is that we put ourselves in a position to receive what he can give us. We are – stupendous thought – *to put on the mind of Christ.* But be careful. Ask yourself: *Do I really want what Christ offers?* For Our Lord can give you only one thing and that is himself. I mean, he can make you a little like himself. That is he can shape you in his love so that you become a little more loving. He can give you self-overcoming, self-transcendence, so that, again just a little – for we are not saints – just a little you begin to discard the clamour of self-interest and learn to be set free by love.

*Lent* is just the old word for *springtime*. Christ began Lent in the wilderness. Lent is the springtime of the soul which promises the harvest of salvation to eternal life. There is something shocking about Christ as he goes into the wilderness. Note this: he doesn't just wander into the wilderness and get lost, as if it were all some unfortunate accident. St Matthew tells us straight: *Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.* It was God's will that his Son should be tested in this way. What this means for us is that we too are driven by the Spirit of God into the wilderness. And the wilderness is your own soul, the wild beasts and the devils are your unruly desires. If you are to be a disciple, you must go into the wilderness and face your demons.

The Spirit of God wishes to lead us, as he led Christ, into the wilderness. Like Christ, we have the freedom to choose whether we dare go there or not. The wonderful thing about the way we are made, is that we are not only conscious, but we are self-conscious. Furthermore, we *know* we have self-consciousness. And it is this knowledge of our freedom which is the basis for our freedom.

When Christ was tempted, he did not fail the test. We know before we start that we shall fail. This doesn't matter at all. When we fall, it is Christ who picks us up and carries us with him. He is the Saviour. It is his *property always to have mercy.* We are invited to follow him as best we can, weak and imperfect as we are. So ditch all those guilty feelings and comfort yourself with the understanding that, *We are only undefeated because we have gone on trying. Ours is only the trying, the rest is not our business.*

I end with a verse from George Herbert's poem *Lent* which tells us what happens to our soul in this season as we follow the footsteps of Christ in the wilderness:

*Who goeth in the way which Christ hath gone, Is much more sure to meet him, than one, That travelleth  
byways: Perhaps my God, though he be far before, may turn and take me by the hand and more, May  
strengthen my decays...*