

Dear Friends,

We have now begun the 40 days of Lent, remembering the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, preparing himself for his mission. I once spent about 40 minutes sitting with others in the hills overlooking the desert of Judah, the scene of Jesus's temptations that we traditionally hear about on the first Sunday of Lent. It was a very hot day, and looking at the stark, barren landscape we had a great sense of being cut back to the essentials of life, to what really matters - the desert or wilderness is good at giving one that feeling.

Apart from the 40 days the one thing everybody knows about Lent is that it is a time for *giving things up*. 'What are you giving up for Lent this year?' people will ask. In present circumstances we are having to give up so much of our normal life anyway that maybe we need not focus so much on that side of things, but could instead consider the two other means offered to us to make the most of this season - almsgiving and prayer.

There was a well-known priest called Alan Fudge based at a church in central London, where I sometimes went on Ash Wednesday. He always insisted that almsgiving was the most important of the three Lenten disciplines, arguing that what we do with our money and resources is the sign of what we really believe. As Jesus says in the Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday, you can make a parade of your faith and devotion if you want to and will receive the reward of being admired by others: how wonderfully pious he/she is, they will say. But what counts most is what God sees of you - not on the surface of things, but at the centre of yourself; and if your heart is truly set on God it will show in the way you live your life, the values that you consider important, the concern and generosity you exercise towards those in need. One of the benefits of fasting certainly is that if you save money through not eating so much or drinking, spending on things you enjoy, you will have more money available for charitable giving.

It happens frequently in the Gospels that Jesus withdraws to be on his own, maybe in a desert place, to refresh and strengthen himself by prayer. But surprisingly perhaps he says very little, or is recorded as saying little, about prayer - apart from giving the disciples the Our Father as a model of what to say when they ask him to teach them how to pray. What could he have been doing when he spends all night or even longer in prayer? He could not possibly have been *saying* prayers for all that time.

We get some idea of it in this same Gospel passage, Matthew chapter 6, where Jesus says, 'Whenever you pray go into your room and shut the door, and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.' There is a little joke or irony here, as hardly anybody in his day would have had a house with private rooms into which you could withdraw. It is believed, therefore, that by the inner room Jesus does not mean a physical place, but the heart of yourself, the centre of your being where God dwells.

Also in this passage Jesus says, 'When you are praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, because they think that they will be heard because of their many words.' To shut the door could be interpreted as closing out the flood of thoughts and words that make up so much of our prayer and ordinary conscious awareness, and being content with something simpler. There is in fact a tradition of Christian prayer from early days which suggests using just one phrase or single word constantly repeated as a way of bringing one to the silence and stillness we need in order to listen to God. It cannot be wrong to say

prayers and devotional exercises, but more and more I believe that we need to move into this simpler way of praying if we are to know God more deeply and truly.

There is a short prayer much used in the eastern Orthodox church which can be most helpful here. It is called the Jesus Prayer and has various forms, one of which is:

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.

If you think about it, this more or less sums up everything we ever want to say in prayer: it focuses on Jesus, who is our Way, our Truth and our Life, and it calls on God in Christ to show his mercy, which contains everything that God wants to share of himself with us his people.

Here is my suggestion for Lent. When you can, give yourself a period of time and be in a quiet place where you will not be interrupted. Settle yourself, and then interiorly, not aloud, begin saying the prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. Say it continually for the time you have and be content with the simplicity and poverty of this one prayer - 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.' Do not think about the meaning of the words, but listen to them as you sound them inside yourself. You will inevitably find thoughts soon intruding, but do not worry about them or engage with them. Let them go gently and keep returning to the prayer. It does not matter how many times you need to do this. Each time we come back to the prayer is a return to God from our own thoughts and preoccupations.

If you do try this way you will need something to time yourself by, so that you can keep the prayerful focus without having to look at the clock every so often. The oven in my kitchen has a timer, which sounds a ping when the time is up that I can hear in another room, so you need something like that. Some watches have a similar device. Start with 15 minutes and, if you can, make it a regular date day by day.

Prayer like this is a good way, I believe, of practising the Lenten fast, and it can grow into a way of life, of being, that you can keep with you always, so that in all things we are centred on God. The important thing is not to have any expectations, not to look for anything to happen, but to be faithful in letting go of oneself and handing everything over to God.

So happy praying during Lent,

Fr. Robin

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P.S. People sometimes get themselves into a tangle trying to work out when the 40 days of Lent begin and end. I seem to remember Fr. Fudge telling us about it, but cannot recall now what he said! My own thought, for what it is worth, is that 40 days or 40 years in Scripture does not necessarily mean that exact number, but is used to mean a good long stretch of time. Surely it hardly matters if it was not precisely 40 days and nights that Jesus spent in the wilderness, or if it took the people exactly 40 years to reach the promised land: it was just a long time. But if anyone can tell me how to calculate the 40 days of Lent precisely I shall be glad to know!

