

The Spirit of Lent

by Victor Hoagland, C.P.

Begin with the gospel for Ash Wednesday. Nothing offers better guidance on our lenten journey than the words Jesus spoke to his disciples, read during the liturgy of this day:



“Give alms...Pray to your Father...Fast without a gloomy face...” (*Matthew 6: 1-18*)

Give... pray... fast.

Almsgiving

Giving alms, Jesus teaches, means making the needs of others our own, especially the needy of our world. They are all around us: children and the old, the sick and the suffering, families and individuals, next-door neighbors and people in lands faraway.

We easily forget them. Rather than just looking out for ourselves — what people say today — see those in need, Jesus says. Giving will make you live.

And what shall we give? Some time, some of our talent, material resources, perhaps. Almsgiving is not just for the rich. Poor or rich, we all have something to give.

Whatever we give, though, should be something of ourselves, something that costs us. Paradoxically, Jesus also teaches, when we give, we receive some blessing from God in return.

What shall we give to the needy this lent? In deciding, decide generously. After all, before us is the great alms Jesus gave: “He loved us, and gave himself up for us.”



Prayer

“Pray to your Father.”

The Lenten season calls us to pray. But prayer, Jesus teaches, is much more than saying words. “Go into your room, and close the door, and pray to your Father in secret.”

Before you pray, enter the inner room of your heart. Shut the door to the noise, the trivialities, the countless cares grabbing for attention. Put them aside. In the quiet place of your heart, with faith as your guide, speak to your God. A gracious Father listens, and he knows what you need.

God helps us pray in this season. For those who have stopped praying, or pray with little fervor, God gives graces for praying again. Usually the graces come as we turn to prayers and practices already there: reflective reading of the Bible or other spiritual books, the Eucharist and the other sacraments, simple grace-filled prayers, like the Our Father or the psalms.

“What a Christian should be doing at all times should be done now with greater care and devotion,” Pope St. Leo told Christians of the 6th century beginning their Lenten observance. What can we do this season to pray with greater care and devotion? Participate in some church services? Read the bible or a spiritual book some minutes each day? Put aside some time for quiet daily prayer?



Fasting

“When you fast do not look gloomy,” Jesus says. Today’s consumer society looks on fasting itself as gloomy. Urging everyone to eat, drink, and buy more and more, our world today has made fasting unfashionable.

Yet the gospel message says more and more can ruin human life. An acquisitive spirit is a selfish spirit. And as the alarming numbers of people addicted to drugs and alcohol today prove, the taste for too much can destroy.

Food and drink, clothes and amusements — the good things of life — can turn into your captors, Jesus teaches. In our acquisitive, pleasure-oriented society, fasting is a way of keeping ourselves free.

This Lent, recognizing the hold things have on us, let us try, with God’s help, to keep them in their right place. Some reasonable abstaining from food, drink and entertainments can help us do that.

Indeed today we have new compelling reasons for taking fasting seriously. As the resources of our planet are increasingly threatened, it becomes clear that the human family, especially those living in affluent nations, can no longer be unlimited consumers. We must develop a leaner, less wasteful way of life, if our planet is to survive.

Can the Christian teaching on fasting lead us to a gentler style of living on planet earth?

