

Today it would be advantageous for us to spend some time reviewing the church year, and then discussing Lenten disciplines, and then briefly look at today's readings through the lens of our theme hymn for the Pre-Lenten season, the “-gesima” Sundays, that we begin today with Septuagesima.

The full season of the Incarnation and revelation of Christ has ended for us with our celebration of Candlemas. Today is the pivot to the pre-Lenten season where we turn our attention from the nativity to the cross, with themes focused upon the atonement, our sanctification, and finally our glorification. The other pivot will be on Trinity Sunday which turns our attention from the cross to growth in the knowledge of our faith and in the virtue of our lives. Trinity then finally turns back to Advent at the end of November, which is the beginning of the Christian year starting the cycle over again.

Lent for us this year begins on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, and the focus of Lent is upon mourning our sins, and upon purging sin from our lives. With this focus, one of the spiritual/ physical discipline that the church commends to us – more precisely it commands to us – is fasting. Now fasting can be applied in many different ways. Most traditionally, we fast from food by refraining from eating for a period of time or by modifying our diets to give up something that we really like. For example, sweets are commonly given up for Lent, and so is alcohol. For the really hard core out there, try fasting from caffeine. Some may give up food for Wednesdays and Fridays during Lent; this may be for the whole 24 hour period or maybe until noon or 6 pm. There are also progressive fasts where in each successive week a different class of food is restricted so that the fast becomes more difficult as Lent progresses.

Why are dietary fasts so encouraged? This is an ancient practice, and the example is even set for us by Christ Himself. The gospel reading for the first Sunday of Lent is Christ being driven out into the wilderness where he fasted 40 days prior to being tempted by the devil. The number forty is highly significant in the Bible. It represents a period of cleansing, purging, and preparation, and it is often followed by temptations and trials to prove faithfulness. For example, in the Great Flood of Genesis chapter 7, the rain fell for forty days and forty nights, washing away the evil on earth. Moses fasted on Mt. Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights prior to receiving the Law from God. The Hebrew spies explored the land of Canaan for 40 days; then when the Hebrew people refused to conquer the land because they did not believe nor obey God, they wandered through the dessert for 40 years – one year for each day of spying – until the unbelief was purged from the people of God. Forty stripes was the maximum number allowed to punish an offender in Jewish society. Many Hebrew leaders began to reign when they were forty, and a peaceful reign often lasted 40 years. Christ also remained on earth for 40 days after the resurrection preparing His disciples to carry on in His stead after the Ascension. All of these examples represent periods of purification and preparation, and we should view our Lenten fast of forty days in the same light.

Now our fast is not quite exactly forty days, but it is forty days if the Sundays are excluded. Sunday, as the day of resurrection and the new day of rest for the Church, is a feast day which breaks up our fast by weeks. Still the principle remains that we are to enter, in some very minor way, into the sufferings and self-denial of Jesus Christ. This is part of

walking in the footsteps of Christ as He journeys to the cross. It is also so that we may have mastery over our bodies so that we would better resist temptation in the times to come. I've also heard it said that fasting is the prayer of our bodies, that it is a prayer without words in which our bodies suffer and mourn. We are not gnostics; our bodies matter and have an impact upon our spiritual condition. In those times when you are sore tempted to break your fast, be reminded that Christ did not break His fast, but continued faithfully for us. He determined to suffer greatly for us in every way so that He could demonstrate His total mastery over sin, showing to the world that He was in deed the Messiah.

It is also common in today's world that many people also take a technology fast by giving up social media, or YouTube, or computer games or other smart phone applications upon which we spend inordinate amounts of time. The point is that each of us would examine our lives to see where we are spending our time, and would refresh our minds by intentionally stepping away from such devices. Certainly there are other fasts of which you can partake as well – anything that allows you in your body to set this season apart. In fact, St. Paul even suggests that periods of fasting could be accompanied by fasting from marital relations. In 1 Corinthians 7:5, he writes, “Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.” A more lighthearted fast in which I participate is that I fast from shaving during Lent, which is loosely based upon the vow of the Nazarite in the Book of Numbers chapter 6.

Now we are not quite to Lent yet, so why all of this discussion regarding Lenten disciplines? Because we are in the season of preparation. Our liturgical color is now purple, and we are fasting from the Gloria and from Alleluias to connect us directly to upcoming season. Lent is a spiritual battle, but we are now to be training to engage in that battle. St. Paul in the Epistle this morning uses the analogy of athletes who train for their competition. We are to spiritually run with endurance so that we may endure when the trials come our way. We are to practice with the intensity of a wrestler so that when we are called upon to wrestle with the world, the flesh, or the devil, we are ready in body and soul.

So what is your training plan? First, you must spend some time in prayer and self-reflection this week. What is your besetting sin? What do you fight against and yet never seems to conquer? Are there sinful habits of which you aren't even aware that you need to discover? I recommend seeking the input of a spouse or family member and prayerfully considering what they say. Having determined what you would like to address in your life, then write down your plan for fasting and praying during Lent. Be specific. Does giving up sweets mean giving up honey, or more specifically candy and dessert? If you are clear about the parameters of your fast, then you will likely be more successful. You will want to coordinate with your spouse as well, because he may have no intention of giving up pie for you! It is less logistically complicated if you have some agreement regarding fasting for the season.

Finally, when choosing a fast, especially if this is new to you, start simple. Do not make a fast so difficult that you will most probably fail. Link your physical discipline to the

spiritual fight upon which you will engage. This is battle – take the opportunity that Mother Church has provided to benefit the health of our souls.

Regarding today's readings: one commentator said that these lessons remind us it is never too late to be saved, and that it is never too late to lose your salvation. I know this flies in the face of those of among us who are once-saved, always-saved adherents. But there are plenty of warning passages in the scriptures that we must take seriously. At the very least, we know of plenty of prominent modern evangelists that have lost their ministries and undermined the faith of their flocks because they were leading double lives. No doubt that to some extent this is the case of each one of us here. We all try to hide our sins from each other and some might even lead us to perdition. We must not let this be our case; we must work out our faith with fear and trembling, being careful, diligent, and disciplined, so that we would not be a casualty along the way before our race is ended or before our wrestling match has been won. These readings point us to the fact that the Christian life is a life of work, and thus the focus in the Pre-Lenten season is upon the effort, the work, that is normative for a Christian.

Doesn't this get tiring? Yes – most definitely. Hasn't each of us wanted to give up some times? Yes – we have all been pushed to the brink, and probably have thought about just walking away from it all. Two things, however, keep us pressing forward. First, where would we go? Jesus has the words of eternal life. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Remaining in fellowship with Him is the richest and most glorious life that we could have so we will accept the work and effort that comes to us because nothing else can fulfill us.

Secondly, our work is ultimately motivated out of God's love for us. Life is a gift. It is a good gift, a great gift, and we have a personal and a communal relationship with the giver of life, the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the theme of our seasonal hymn, #156, *Awake, Awake, to Love and Work!* It is just three verses long, but they are wonderful lyrics paired with a singable and joyous tune. Verse 1 reads:

Awake, awake to love and work! The lark is in the sky;  
The fields are wet with diamond dew; The worlds awake to cry  
Their blessings on the Lord of life, As He goes meekly by.

This is a morning hymn and as such we are exhorted to wake, awake to love and work. Embrace this exhortation because of the gift of life, not only our lives, but the life of the entire world, sings out blessings to the Lord of Life. Life is good and everyday is a gift. Let us give ourselves back to our Creator through service.

Verse two:

Come, let thy voice be one with theirs, Shout with their shout of praise;  
See how the giant sun soars up, Great lord of years and days!  
So let the love of Jesus come And set thy soul ablaze.

Will you join the song of creation by raising your morning song to God as well? The sun warms us, the rains bring forth the fruit of the earth, and all of this is by the loving hand of

Jesus – may His love and care for us nurture a greater desire in us to work for Him. May our souls shine like the sun illuminated by the love of God and the love for God!

To give and give, and give again What God hath given thee;  
To spend thyself nor count the cost; To serve right gloriously  
The God who gave all worlds that are, And all that are to be.

Is there a limit to how much we should give to God when He has given all? Is there a cost to us that surpasses the cost that Christ paid? If we understand what He did for us, then shouldn't we desire to serve Him right gloriously? Perhaps this is the sin we should be thinking about this Lent – that we have become numb to the love of Christ for us. Is anything more grievous than this? We are too complacent, and it is time to shake off our slumber, and to let our souls once again blaze forth in the fire of the Spirit.

God, in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, has given us everything we need for salvation and to live our eternal life right now. He saved us, and He feeds us most especially through this sacrament set here before us. Have our hearts grown cold? Have we missed something else that needs to be addressed? Do not let this season pass by without examining your soul and planning your fast. And may God give us the grace in Christ to keep a holy Lent. - AMEN