

Hi! How's Your Lent?

"Whud'you give up for Lent?"

Remember that question?

Remember the answers? – besides "I gave up answerin' stupid questions," and "None o' yer bizness" – I mean. There were the standards when we were kids: candy, soda (pop – pronounced "pap" – in Illinois; tonic – pronounced "tawnik" in Eastern Massachusetts), movies, dessert, and other little pleasurables.

Not Just Giving Up

Then we got more hip. We figured out it wasn't always just a question of giving something up; you could *do* something, add something for Lent. Going to daily Mass was a good one for Catholics; an extra rosary....

Scripture, maybe: reading a couple chapters from the Bible worked nicely for Protestants – if they were the kind of Protestants who believed in Lent. In the '60s and '70s Catholics discovered the Bible wasn't a Protestant book, despite all reports, and they began to enjoy what they'd missed. Bible reading came back into Catholics' lives – and "Scripture Services," which were very much like good Protestant Sunday services when that congregation wasn't celebrating Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper.

Not Just for Priests Anymore

Another important Christian celebration or service that had been alive and well through the centuries in monasteries and convents made a tiny come-back. It had survived as an important but often hurried part of Catholic priests' lives – hard to see that form of it as really "celebrated" – and as a pattern for services in things like the Episcopalians' Book of Common Prayer. It is a liturgy chock full of Scripture, more so even than most "Scripture" services, and much more than any Protestant service I ever had the privilege of being present for.

It is the Liturgy of the Hours – called also "The Prayer of Christians." Good name. It reminds us it's not just for priests anymore.

Actually, it was never meant to be just for them. It worked out to be, though, a liturgical prayer that depended a lot on the written word. It still does – almost always – but even that (no longer very difficult) problem can be gotten around.

The current Roman Catholic book that prints the Liturgy of the Hours for Christians to pray – lay and clerical Christians – presents this prayer in one of the most beautiful phrases of any church document:

The hymn of praise that is sung through all the ages in the halls of heaven and brought by the High Priest, Christ Jesus, into this land of earthly exile has been continued by the Church with constant fidelity over many centuries, in a rich variety of forms.... – a kind of necessary complement by which the fullness of divine worship celebrated in the eucharistic sacrifice would overflow to reach all the hours of daily life.

When Christians – lay and clerical Christians – pray this prayer, they give voice here on earth to the eternal prayer which the Lord Jesus offers to his heavenly Father in their Holy Spirit of love "through all the ages in the halls of heaven."

How's It Going? Where's It Going?

So, Lent?

Around about now, sometimes, my Lent needs a shot in the arm. Giving up all that broccoli for three weeks hasn't transformed my soul very much. Maybe I need to move into Phase Two.

"Lent" is a good old four-letter Anglo-Saxon word for the time of year when the earth prepares to break forth into new life, when the frozenness of winter has finally thawed, when the gray skies of the cold season in the old Anglo-Saxon Isle have begun to lighten – and when the hope of seeing flowers once again in all those little English country gardens finally seems to make sense.

Lent is when our linguistic ancestors felt the ice under their feet soften and the fog before their eyes lift. Our geographic ancestors, the native nations that peopled the Americas before Europeans arrived, would, some of them, remove their hard winter shoes lest their walking hurt the soft, spongy spring surface of their... of our mother Earth.

The Native Americans knew a time of flowers was coming to their land. The English people knew that their beloved gardens would bloom in color again. Another people, ancestors to many of us or at least of our language, knew the world was moving in this season toward a time of new and fragrant blooms, toward a *Pascua florida*, a Festival of Flowers.

Rose

The winter dark of somber purple Lent has, for a couple dozen days now, been working its way toward the Sunday of Roses, mid-Lent's *Laetare* Sunday. There we can pause to be more joyful – because this deep, sorrowing purple, we really know, is just a kind of play. Even more play in another week or so – a play more intense, more dramatic, is the old shrouding of statues and even of the Cross in the final weeks before Easter, the *Pascua florida*.

Play. It is but play. And we've seen this play before. We know how it ends. We know what's coming.

We can't keep the rose of Easter out. Like little kids for whom the joke is too much, we cannot remain in Lenten character; we giggle a couple weeks before it is over. We rejoice ahead of time and cry, "Laetare, Jerusalem!" "Rejoice... and be glad for Jerusalem, all you who love her..., all you who were mourning over her!" [Is 66:10] You were mourning? Rejoice now, for you know what will come.

To Mourn

It is not hard these days to mourn for Jerusalem – for the earthly and physical Jerusalem, where hatred and violence keep the poor city on our minds through so many evenings of news. It's not hard to mourn for the "new" Jerusalem, the Church – us – that struggles against weakness and wrong both within and without, and strives to affirm and to celebrate the finest of human nature under God's grace. Oh, lordy, yes, there is mourning; there is mourning unto death.

It can even be possible, I think, to lose hope, to be so aware of the struggle and of those struggling against, that one is tempted to abandon Jerusalem, to move out of the holy city on earth, to look no more toward the heavenly Jerusalem – "Jerusalem, our mother," Augustine says, echoing a millennium of Scripture. Can we leave our mother?

And so, lest the ashes of our somber Lent provide too little encouragement to continue on the road to Jerusalem, a tiny rose of Easter comes in mid-Lent. Yes, we do know how this will end – this Lent, this sorrow, this universe – and we are reminded of joy.

To Rejoice

Since the first days of Lent, its Preface #1 in the Roman Sacramentary has been giving this taunting description of Lent: "this joyful season... with [our] mind and heart renewed."

"Joyful"?? Lent??

Yes, because it's play. The purple – dark violet, really – does not last; the ashes blow away on the *ruah Elohim*; somber winter gives way to the glorious colors of the *Pascua florida*, the Passover from death to life. The rock-hard frozen earth will indeed be rolled away and the Lord will once more walk in the Garden – and call us to belief by the sound of our name.

You know it's coming. Celebrate your Lent like those little kids who giggle ahead of time and give away the ending.

Practice

Brussels sprouts are just practice. Even when we give up the things we most enjoy – dessert, pizza, movies, the martinis before dinner, sleeping the extra hour it would cost us to go to daily Mass – that's all just practice.

An earlier age called it mortification. That sounds terribly grim, almost macabre.

The word is well chosen, though. For when we give up something earthly that we like, we are practicing for the day when everything earthly will rush out of our grasp – everything, even our earthly body itself and our precious earthly life. It can be very hard to give up everything, to let everything go. So we practice a little ahead of time – just to make it easier when every earthly thing goes away. Just so we will remember then, too, how it is all going to end.

Real Fast

Some things are not practice, though. The problem isn't Brussels sprouts; it's not even pizzas and martinis. Those things are just fine for practice.

You want still to fast? Yes. We should.

Fast from what?

Our world has recently been plunged into economic upheaval. Not by accident. Not by people who were trying to do good things and flubbed it.

Our world is suffering mightily because of greed. Thousands, millions of people have been robbed – very effectively, skillfully. From people who had quite little, the little they had was taken away by some few who had very much.

That's not new. It's maybe more blatant now. It is more efficient now. And it's much easier to hear about it very quickly.

And this time, the robber-barons of the Rhine, the Viking marauders, the pirates of Barbary targeted people right here on our shores – maybe you who are reading this! So close to home, it reminds us very painfully how much those who "have" can victimize those who "have not." It reminds us of the pain we can cause when we happen to "have" and others "have not."

For this, another kind of fast is called for, one for which the movies-and-pizza kind of Lent is just practice, just play. "Fast from sin," Augustine says. That's the fast that's most important. The rest is practice.

Fast: To Love and to Listen

Isaiah gives voice to the kind of fast, the kind of Lent God wants. God complains: "You seek your own pleasure on your fastdays, and you exploit your workmen.... One inflicts pain on himself... in sackcloth and ashes.

"Is *this* not rather the sort of fast that pleases me: to break unjust fetters..., to let the oppressed go free...? Is it not sharing your food with the hungry, and sheltering the homeless poor..., and clothing those whom you see without clothes...?" (Is.58:3-7) Isaiah's 66th chapter, out of which the *Laetare Jerusalem* is taken, opens with the same thoughts. And there God says, "I spoke and no one listened."

Now in Phase Two of Lent, what do we do?

Can we fast from ourselves? Can we lay down some of the attention we expend on ourselves – greed, if it's there; the beginnings of greed and selfishness which we surely find there – Can we lay that aside some and listen to God's word? Love – can we act out of love – for our fellow creatures? Can we? Have we practiced enough?

Practice is good. Maybe we should practice a little more – avoid those pizzas and martinis for a few more weeks. But let's not make it all just practice. Let's not just play Lent. We know the joy that is coming, but let's not forget to get ready for it.

A little loving and listening are good on the downhill side of Lent. To fast from whatever in our lives smells a little bit like greed; that's fasting from sin. And it's not just practice; it's not just Brussels sprouts. It's an act of love.

God "spoke and no one listened." Can we listen better? Crack open God's word in Scripture? Insert a little of the Church's ancient scriptural prayer into our lives?

It's true: just like Mary, the disciple of Jesus, in the Garden of Easter morning, we will hear the Lord call our name. Let's practice now, just a little bit, getting used to God's voice. We'll want to recognize it Easter morning. We'll want to know it well when this all ends.

May God bless this time of Lent for you!

May God lead you through this time of listening,
this time of practice,
this time of love and goodness,
to the fullness of Easter joy!

Mark, OSA