

Lent 2010

The air is beginning to warm, the forecasts are starting to call for rain in the valleys, and there's full daylight again while I'm waiting for my bus in the morning. Although it's still February, the signs of spring's return are everywhere. Spring is a powerful word for us; it's a time of new birth, of the return of greenery, light and life to the gray and cold world we've been living in. The world is beginning to wake up everywhere. The Church has set its calendar to be in tune with these changes taking place outside of our windows. Just as we celebrate the birth of the Savior, the Light of the World at the darkest point of the year, and sing of the world's new light coming "Upon a Midnight Clear" and "In the Deep Midwinter", so Easter always comes just after the Spring Equinox, the time when the whole world awakens to new life.

But the signs of spring start slowly, long before Easter. Light comes earlier in the morning, the first crocus pops up through the snow, buds begin to form everywhere. Lent is the season of such things, the time when icy hearts begin to melt in preparation for the coming warmth, slowly turning towards the sun. Even the word "Lent" points towards this. Unlike other languages, whose words for Lent translate as "the time of fasting" or "the forty days", English calls it by an ancient name for "spring". It seems to mean "longer" [like the musical term *lento*: *slower*] because these are the times when the days lengthen.

So what does all of this mean for us and for how we observe Lent? Oftentimes people think of Lent as a time of deprivation and punishment, or as an extended way of the Cross where we inflict pain on ourselves. But this is not what the Church asks of us.

Certainly, the traditional disciplines of Lent (Fasting, Prayer, and Almsgiving) are sacrifices to which we are called. But they ought not to be the joyless practices which we often think of. When Jesus speaks of fasting, he tells his disciples to anoint their heads and wash their faces and to go about with a joyful appearance (Mt 6:17). These disciplines are not punishments inflicted on us; they are freely chosen paths to growth and wholeness.

If Lent is the time of the coming Spring, the time of breathless anticipation of the coming healing of the world, then we naturally want to get ready for the new day which we know to be coming. We are like athletes in Spring Training awaiting the new season, hosts double checking everything before the guests arrive, children packing and repacking before a trip and then asking “are we there yet” until the destination appears in view.

The Lenten disciplines are our practice for the coming Kingdom of God, our attempts to live in the Kingdom that Jesus told us is already in our midst. Let me give an example of what this might look like. I used to live in a town in Washington State up in the mountains. In the depths of winter, the sun rose from behind one mountain about 11:00 am and set behind the next about 12:15. Now, there was daylight for longer than that, but direct sunlight was in very short supply, until the day when the sun finally cleared the mountain. Then – suddenly – there were seven or eight hours of direct sunlight each day. The difference such a change makes for people is amazing. On that day, even though the snow was still several hundred inches deep and the weather wasn't particularly warm, the villagers were so excited that summer was coming that they cancelled everything, put on bright summer shirts and shorts, and had a barbecue out in

the snow. The church often looks like that. We still live in the midst of a world where the Kingdom of God is all but unknown, but we throw a big barbecue out in the snow because we know that summer is coming.

Our Lenten disciplines are practice for the coming summer: Fasting seeks to free us from the service of things so that we can serve God (Mt 6:24); Prayer calls us to a closer relationship with the one who Saint Paul tells us we will eventually know face-to-face (I Cor 13:12); and Almsgiving calls us to live such that each one has what is needed (Acts 2:45). Each of these crazy ways of living has the potential to open up our lives to Christ's coming kingdom and to free us to see that kingdom already in our midst. Our joy in the coming summer banishes the last of winter's chills, even if others can't quite see it yet.

When Saint Benedict, in his *Rule*, tells his monks that their lives ought to be a perpetual Lent (49:1), he isn't saying that theirs should be a life of drudgery and pain. Instead, he is repeating his initial invitation, which the Church now makes to each of us:

Let us arise, then, at last, for the Scripture stirs us up, saying, "Now is the hour for us to rise from sleep" (Rom. 13:11). Let us open our eyes to the deifying light, let us hear with attentive ears the warning which the divine voice cries daily to us, "Today if you hear His voice, harden not your hearts" . . . For as we advance in the religious life and in faith, our hearts expand and we run the way of God's commandments with the unspeakable sweetness of love. (RB Prol.)

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