



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Ash Wednesday 2006 March 1, 2006

Lent is the season to turn back to God, to be reconciled to him, to come closer to him.

The Lord, as we have just heard in the Gospel, recommends three practices if we want to turn back to God, come closer to him. So these are the three practices we undertake especially in Lent.

First, prayer. Just put yourself in the presence of God. Realize, with your whole being, that God is God, and you are you. He is infinite, unchanging and eternal, all-powerful. You are finite, limited. You are constantly subject to change, and, after a certain point in life, subject to continuous physical deterioration until you die. He is all-powerful. You are weak, and in fact utterly dependent on him. You would not even be able to take your next breath if he did not will that you should, if he did not constantly support you, keep you in being, with his power. Now this is the truth about him, and about you, about me. What can our response be, then, but to worship him, to lower ourselves until we are very low, to subject ourselves to him, to see that to want, to wish anything other than his will makes no sense whatsoever?

From this follows the second great aspect of turning to God, the second great practice of Lent: this is self-discipline, the discipline of our desires. When we see that it simply makes no sense to want anything other than what he wants, then so many of our desires just fall away. We see that so many of our wants and desires are for things that we really don't need, for things that in fact, when we get them, just weigh us down, and just make us want still more. If this cycle of wanting more and more for oneself, never being satisfied, isn't broken, we end up quite enslaved in selfishness, caring less and less about God, about the needs of our neighbor, about charity and justice in our world. Our consumer society in fact uses all the powerful means at its disposal, of advertising, the media, the entertainment industries, to keep us enslaved in this endless wanting of more and more, of the newer, the bigger, the better. When we suddenly see, in prayer, who God is, and who we are, this enslavement is broken. We see that we don't need these things. We see how important it is to get control over our desires, to let the many selfish ones go. For many reasons, the first steps of gaining self-control, of becoming liberated from our false desires, are often concerned with our desires for food and drink that we do not need. We let go of our desire for this or that amount or kind of food, which is fine in itself, but which, on this occasion, we don't need, and we have immediately taken a big step in gaining control of our appetite, and a big step in gaining control of our other desires, and so a big step toward freedom, toward making space for God in our life, toward making space for our neighbor in our life. This is the meaning of fast and abstinence:

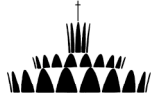


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fasting, on a particular occasion eating less than we would normally eat, or not eating at all; abstinence, on a particular occasion eating as much as we would normally eat, but not eating a particular kind of food that we would normally eat. A form of abstinence practiced by Christians from the very origins of Christianity is abstinence from meat: the meat of four-footed animals and, very often, the meat of poultry as well. Meat is, as it were, the center of a meal, but we don't need to eat meat at every lunch and every dinner. If we abstain from it, let go our desire for it, at one meal, or on one day, every week, we immediately take a great step forward in gaining control of all our desires, we immediately make space for God, we immediately make space for our neighbor and his needs. And how fitting to practice this abstinence on a Friday, the day on which Our Lord gave up not desires, but his whole life, for the sake of every human being, and for the sake of obedience to his Father's will.

Prayer, then, and self-discipline, especially fasting and abstinence, the first two great means of turning to God, the first two great disciplines of Lent. The third follows naturally from these two: it is charity toward our neighbor, love, service toward our neighbor, especially toward the poor and needy, towards every human being who is poor or needy in any of the limitless ways in which a human being can be poor and needy. Almsgiving, giving money to the poor, has always been recognized as a central form of this charity toward the poor, but in our time we rightly emphasize that what is required is the fullness of love toward neighbor, expressed concretely in whatever way is needed by our neighbor. You heard about all this from Mr. Cavanaugh in the prayer assembly on Monday. You remember that he said that this charity, love, service toward neighbor is not just being "nice" to someone who isn't particularly nice, whom we don't particularly care for. No, we are talking about love, the greatest, deepest, most powerful reality in human life. Love of neighbor means penetrating to the depths of the neighbor and finding what is good there, no matter how deeply it is hidden -- and the good there will be there, because that neighbor was created in the image of God, and called to be a child of God -- and then love means calling that good forth, and making it strengthen and grow. Loving neighbor is not this wretchedly superficial idea of being "nice" to someone, no, it is, by the power of God, calling another being to life by love. And do you see how it necessarily accompanies the other two practices of Lent, prayer and self-discipline? For when we see the truth about God and ourselves, that God is God and we are we, and utterly dependent on him, and when in consequence our selfish desires, our wish to assert ourselves, push ourselves forward and upward, falls away, then suddenly there is room in our life, in our heart, for God, and for our neighbor who is in the image of God. We are liberated for love, which is what we were made for and what we are called to. Prayer, self-discipline, love of God and love of neighbor in God -- this is what turning to God is, this is what Lent is. And since turning to God is becoming our true self, then turning to God, Lent, is liberation, is beginning anew, is joy. May it be all that, by the Lord's love and mercy, for you, for me.



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