

What is Lent

From "Evangelical is Not Enough" by Thomas Howard

[Lent] is the forty days leading up to Easter, which also recall the forty days of Christ's temptation in the wilderness. There is a telescoping of things here, since His temptation did not in actual fact immediately precede His Passion, but "liturgical time" is such that spiritual significance may override chronological exactness.

Lent, like Advent, is a time of penitence. Here we identify ourselves with the Lord's fast and ordeal in the wilderness, which He bore for us.

The ancient Church, in its observance of Lent, once more asks us to move through the gospel with Christ Himself. The most obvious mark of Lent to a newcomer is the matter of fasting. I had known about this practice all my life. My Catholic playmates would give up chocolates or Coke or ice cream for Lent. I also knew that a few devout people in my own tradition of evangelicalism practiced fasting now and again for special purposes—a time of especially concentrated prayer, for example.

I myself thought of Lenten fasting and also of the old Catholic practice of refusing meat on Fridays as being legalistic, and perhaps even heretical, since it seemed to entail some notion of accruing merit. Since Christ had done all, why should we flagellate ourselves this way? Was it not a return to the weak and beggarly elements condemned by Saint Paul? Was it not to be guilty of the very thing that the apostle had assailed the Galatian Christians for?

I discovered that the ancient Church teaches just what the New Testament teaches on the point, namely, that fasting is a salutary thing for us to undertake. Jesus fasted and assumed that His followers would. "When you fast" (Matt. 6:16), He said, not "if." Saint Paul both practiced it and taught it. It seems to constitute a reminder to us that our appetites are not all and that man shall not live by bread alone. Furthermore, if we may believe the universal testimony of Christians who do practice it, it also clarifies our spiritual vision somehow. Lastly, it is a token of the Christian's renunciation of the world. There is no *thing* that a Christian will insist he must have at all costs. Fasting supplies an elementary lesson here.

Lent asks us to ponder Christ's self-denial for us in the wilderness. It draws us near to the mystery of Christ's bearing temptation for us in His flesh, and of how in this Second Adam our flesh, which failed in Adam, now triumphs.

Lent also leads us slowly toward that most holy and dread of all events, the Passion of Christ. What Christian will want to arrive at Holy Week with his heart unexamined, full of foolishness, levity, and egoism? To those for whom any special observances hint of legalism or superstition one can only bear witness that the solemn sequence of Lent turns out to be something very different from one's private attempts at meditation on the Passion. To move through the disciplines in company with millions and millions of other believers all over the world is a profoundly instructive thing.

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday. The first time ashes were imposed on my forehead, I found a cacophony of voices inside me: "Come! Now you have betrayed your background! This is straight back to the Dark Ages. Fancy Saint Paul's doing this!"

I knew it was not so when the priest came along with the little pot of damp ashes and with his thumb smudged my forehead- *my forehead*, the very frontal and crown of my dignity as a human being! - and said, "Remember, O man, that dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return."

I knew it was true. I would return to dust, like all men, but never before had mortality come home to me in this way. Oh, I had believed in spirituality. But surely we need not dramatize it this way....

Perhaps we should, says the Church. Perhaps it is good for our souls' health to recall that our salvation, far from papering over the grave, leads us through it and raises our very mortality to glory. We, like all men, must die. I felt the strongest inclination to wave the priest past as he approached me in the line of people kneeling at the rail. Not me- not me- like Agag coming forth delicately, hoping that the bitterness of death was past. Yes, you. O man....

I was beginning to learn that when we encounter some "spiritual" truth in our *bodies*, it is brought home to us. We can meditate on suffering all day long, for example, but let us have migraines, and we know something we could not have known through merely mulling over the doctrine of suffering. We can meditate on love all day long, but let us kiss the one we long for, and we know immediately something we could not have known if we had thought about love for a thousand years. Nay-our very salvation came to us in the body of the incarnate God. "O generous love! that He who smote/In Man for man the foe,/ The double agony in Man/For man should undergo," says Cardinal Newman's hymn. The ashes effected something in me more than a smudge on my forehead. I had felt, if only for a moment, the thing that I wished most earnestly to be exempted from: death.