

Commentary as Lenten season starts.



'Now, now - it is the Lord who speaks - come back to me with all your hearts, fasting, weeping, mourning.' Let your hearts be broken not your garments torn. Turn to the Lord your God again, for he is all tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in graciousness, and ready to relent. (Joel 2: 12-13)

The initiative is God's, it always has been. He created us, He sustains us, He reveals himself to us and He redeems us. And in this season of Lent, as we embark on our 40 day journey, God's words bring us back to this basic point: "Now, now – it is the Lord who speaks." We are to be in no doubt, then, that everything we are about to experience during this holy season - and any or all of the progress we might make along the way - is a response to His Word.

The reading from Joel also warns us that our Lenten observances – whatever we resolve to do – must reach deep down and well below the level of mere ritual or habitual practice. "May your hearts be broken, not your garments torn," says the prophet referring to a commonplace expression of ancient near Eastern remorse. Rending our clothes might be a suitable external appearance of lament and repentance – although less so in our western culture – but it needs to be the sign of something more radical going on beneath the surface if it is to have any real meaning.

So, too, with our practices this Lent.

Why Fast?

The traditions of fasting and abstinence in Lent have always been about stepping back from potential idols. These twin disciplines are about giving ourselves space to say “Yes” to God again by recognising that we don’t need alcohol or rich food or television or twenty-four hour news or the internet to be alive and happy.

The Fathers of the early Church understood fasting during Lent as fasting from sin and everything that leads to it. These 40 days were truly penitential for these early

Christians in that their fasting not only signalled their sorrow for their past sins but, more positively, were attempts to change their future behaviour.

So one approach to take in deciding what we should or shouldn’t give up is to think about what tends to get us into trouble. If we tend to drink too much and then behave badly towards others, cut out the alcohol. If we tend to go to bed too late and then find ourselves irritable and grumpy with our work colleagues the next day because we’re tired, cut out the late nights. Work out what leads us into sins - small and great - and then fast from those things.

Fasting & Almsgiving

Every year, across our diocese, congregations give generously to a Lenten CAFOD collection taken on the second Sunday of the season. The money raised is connected to a voluntary Fast Day - this year it will be Friday 27 February.

The link between our fasting and our giving is a valuable one. Giving from our excess to help the poor and needy in one sense is easy. But actually sharing in their hunger is another thing altogether.

This year we are also asked to give to the Diocesan Lenten alms charities: Cenacolo and Aid to the Church in Need (see below for details of their work).

Prayer, Fasting & Almsgiving

The tradition of the Church has never been just fasting and almsgiving alone. It has always included prayer. While fasting and almsgiving connects us with one another, it is our prayer that puts us in touch with the Lord.

Part of our Lenten journey must surely be walking prayerfully with Jesus in his Passion. Why not find time to read through St Mark's account of Jesus' last days: Mark, chapters 14 & 15.

East Anglia Diocese