

What is Lent about?

For most people Lent is about giving something up. For 40 days we do without some indulgence. Lent is about fasting.

If we are questioned further we would come up with the other two pillars, prayer and almsgiving. Fasting, prayer and almsgiving that is what we associate with Lent.

However, Lent began as the time of immediate preparation for baptism. The catechumens of the Church, those who were preparing for baptism at Easter, the first RCIA candidates would spend an intensive time of prayer and penance before being received into the Church at Easter. Eventually, the practice was such that everyone would join them in order to get ready for Easter.

That's one of the things we do as part of Easter Mass- the renewal of our baptismal promises and we are sprinkled with the Easter water. That's one of the fun jobs the priest gets to do-but alas like many things it will probably not happen on account of the pandemic.

One of the themes of today's readings is Baptism, especially the reading from the 1st letter of Peter. "Noah and those who were saved from the great flood pre-figured all those who would be saved by the waters of Baptism.

"Baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

Lent began so that those who were to be baptized would take it seriously. Baptism is the first Sacrament, so maybe we can use Lent to reflect on how seriously we take all the sacraments, to acknowledge the gift of the sacraments, to see the closeness of God, the mystery of God, present in all the sacraments? In addition, during these pandemic days, we have been forced to live without the sacraments, or to celebrate them in a very limited and restricted manner. Do we yearn for the gift that we are missing out on?

Sister Ruth Burrows is an English Carmelite, who put it this way,

"Never are we more truly Christian than when we approach the sacraments with the Christian community. This is where God 'touches' us. Here, at this moment is our guarantee. What need have we of a word spoken inwardly when we hear the word spoken outwardly? 'My body for you; your sins are forgiven...In our Sacred Liturgy we have the concrete certainty of divine encounter and action. We are grounded on objectivity rather than the quicksand of our poor subjectivity which can in certain states seem so sure, so divine."

What's she talking about? When we use the word faith, what do we mean? It is a strong inner word deep within our soul that speaks of strength, security and personal identity. But for Burrows faith is about a trust in the outer word, trust in a transcendent word, a trust in the word of God.

As she says, "What need have we of a word spoken inwardly when we hear the word spoken outwardly?" And the outward word she looks at is the sacramental word.

The words of the Eucharist, "This is my body given up for you,"

The words of Confession, "Your sins are forgiven."

For a moment take a look at the words of marriage.

How many marriages drift apart because of an over emphasis on the subjective word, the feeling, the spark, the word that speaks to my soul is gone. But what about the outer word of one's vows? "I promise to be faithful to you" Does not the outer word sometimes challenge the certainty of the subjective word of our own feelings?

Burrows in her reflection, when she speaks of the subjective word, is speaking to that idea that my own personal approach, personal experience, personal spirituality are somehow greater than what is going on here within the Body of Christ as we celebrate the Eucharist.

But there is also another problem. Again in the Gospel we hear of Jesus' 40 days in the desert where he is tempted by the devil. The devil is the father of lies and sometimes we are in the depths of a dark subjectivity. We believe his lies to be true. Feelings of sadness and despair, voices of condemnation and blame are more real than the Word of God that says we are forgiven, that we are saved, that we are loved.

In a few moments we will once again hear the words of Consecration in the Eucharistic prayer, "This is my Body which will be given up for you." And in that sacramental word, do we realize, do we realize objectively how far we are away from sin and how close we are to God?