

March Newsletter – Lenten Season

Dear People of God: The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting. ... [T]he whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew the repentance and faith.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. (BCP, 264-5)

The words above, taken from the *Book of Common Prayer's* Ash Wednesday liturgy, deserve some reflection. The early Church, we are told, remembered Christ's passion and resurrection by dedicating themselves to a season of penitence and fasting. That's a pretty clear message. So, if we are to follow the earliest traditions of the Church, we should devote ourselves to fasting and repenting for the forty days leading up to Easter.

I've noticed, however, that many of us are less inclined to follow the path of the early Church. I'm not exactly sure why that is. Perhaps fasting and penitence seems too difficult, though I don't believe it is any more difficult for us than it was for the early Christians. Of course, our predecessors did not have to contend with all the advertising ingenuity that is central to television and social media in a capitalist society. That might be an argument for limiting the time spent on social media and television during Lent.

But I think there is another reason so many of us avoid fasting as well. Most of us realize that God does not need our fasts. Our meatless Fridays and our renunciation of certain comforts do nothing for God, and as we are all aware that salvation does not depend on our works and efforts but on God's grace.

True enough; but that's not the whole story. A few years ago, I received as a gift a tee shirt with a quotation from the Danish Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard that I think reveals the real purpose of prayer, and fasting.

According to Kierkegaard “the function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.” The same can be said for fasting. Fasting isn’t a way of manipulating God to love us more or to win a pass into heaven. Instead fasting is a way of lessening the hold of my appetites on me; following Kierkegaard, it is a way of changing my nature for the better.

But what’s the point of changing my nature if it won’t result in God loving me more or giving me an easier way into heaven? I think the answer to that question can be found in a small passage from the third chapter of the *Gospel according to John*. In this account, Jesus and his followers have begun baptizing, and more are going to be baptized by Jesus than by John. Someone goes to the Baptist and points out to him that Jesus and his followers are now winning over more people than John, who was baptizing before Jesus began. In response to this, John says of Jesus “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

The same can be said of each of us. “He must increase, but I must decrease.” That’s the point of the Lenten fasting; we’re making a space for God to enter the world because when there is less of me and less of my agenda and my appetites, there is more room in the world for God. It is in that way that we are called, like the Baptist, to be forerunners for the Christ, making a highway for our God, as the prophet Isaiah had put it.

So, dear people of God, I invite you to the observance of a holy Lent, by minimizing your presence in the world so that God may more fully enter into the world through your life.