

“PREPARING FOR LENT”

LENT 2013

PASTORAL LETTER OF ARCHBISHOP GEORGE STACK

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Lent has come early this year – almost the earliest it can possibly be. It begins this Wednesday with the blessing and distribution of Ashes. The celebration of Easter is a moveable feast, taking place on the first Sunday after the full moon of the Spring Equinox. This means that Easter can be celebrated at any time from 22 March until 25 April. Astronomical calculations dictate that the Jewish Passover falls on the Sunday following the Spring new moon. Since the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD the Church has kept the feast of the “passing over” of Jesus from death to life at this time. The Rising Sun, Darkness and Light, Life and Death; all of these profound truths are contained in the mysteries we celebrate at Easter.

“Lent” comes from the ancient English word for “lengthening” – the lengthening of days, symbolizing the pattern of new life which emerges during the season of Spring. Flowers, new born lambs, baby chicks and Easter eggs all speak of the springing up of new life. The Church uses reminders of life all around us as signs and symbols of the New Life won for us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The forty days of preparation which make up Lent take their origin from the period of final preparation of those converts who wished to be baptized into the mystery of the life,

death and resurrection of Jesus. It was also a time of penance and reconciliation for those who had fallen away from their Christian vocation, usually from apostasy or other “deadly” sins. Penance, fasting, abstinence and other spiritual disciplines were the outward sign of the inner conversion needed if they were once more to be received into the community of faith and receive Holy Communion on Easter Day.

Forty is a precious number in the Christian life. It is a reminder of the forty years the people of Israel wandered in the desert in search of the Promised Land. The forty days and forty nights of the storms and floods told in the story of Noah’s Ark remind us of the purification and new life brought about by water. But most of all, it is the forty days that Jesus went into the desert before his public ministry which set the pattern for Lent. There he was tempted as he struggled to understand what he was being called to do, who he was called to be.

The lessons for us are obvious. We are all on a journey – the journey of life itself. We are on the journey of faith to a deeper relationship with God in and through Jesus Christ. It is easy to get distracted and confused on that journey, making choices and following directions which do not bring ultimate fulfilment and happiness. On Ash Wednesday we put ashes on our foreheads as an outer reminder that we need to “Turn away from sin and believe in the gospel”. The ashes remind us to “Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return”. In other words, measure the things of this world, and your place in it, by the things of heaven.

The Lenten exercises provided by the Church are meant to be aids in this inner journey which we are all called to make; Confession,

Stations of the Cross, Daily Mass, Spiritual Reading such as that contained in the booklet “Walk with Me”. All invitations summed up in the words “Come back to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning”. (Joel 2:12) The traditional disciplines of fasting and abstinence, depriving ourselves of food, drink, and other pleasures we take for granted are outward signs too. They remind us that our bodies need to be disciplined as well as our mind and our spirit. And, perhaps, most painful of all, the giving of money and alms to charity, making gifts to the poor. This is why we have Lenten Alms boxes in our churches.

In his Lenten message during this Year of Faith, Pope Benedict speaks about charity and solidarity with the poor as being one of the first fruits of the life of faith. He reminds us that “...the greatest work of charity is evangelisation, which is the “ministry of the word”. There is no greater action more beneficial - and therefore more charitable-towards one’s neighbour than to break the bread of the word of God, to share with our neighbour the Good News of the Gospel, to introduce our neighbour to a relationship with God: evangelisation is the highest and most integral promotion of the human person”. I am grateful to those parishes which are promoting scripture groups and study, faith sharing groups and pastoral outreach during this year of Faith. They are providing good foundations for the life of the Church in this Diocese for the years to come. I look forward to welcoming those adults who are seeking Baptism and Full Communion with the Catholic Church to St. David’s Cathedral for the Rite of Election on Sunday 17 February at 3.00pm. They are an example to us all, and give a promise and hope for the future.

With every blessing for a holy Lent and a happy Easter.

Yours devotedly

+George Stack

Archbishop of Cardiff