



## The Oratoire, Aix-en-Provence

Sunday, 1<sup>st</sup> March – First Sunday of Lent

Sermon preached by Christine Portman, Reader

“Give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit; and, as you know our weakness, so may we know your power to save”. The 40 days of Lent have begun and, as today’s Collect reminds us, just as Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, we’re being offered a special time for spiritual reflection.

Self-discipline, denying ourselves some of the many comforts we’ve grown used to, is not easy. But going without something we take for granted can give us heightened self-awareness, and the space to think and pray more about the meaning of our faith. If in Lent we make time to reflect on our relationship with God, we enrich our understanding of Easter.

I don’t know how you mark these 40 days. As children, the house rule was no sweets, we had to forgo the regular Friday bag of chocolates from Aunt Gladys 😊 - but as I got older the emphasis changed. Lent became less about cutting out certain things and more about trying to do something positive: joining in Lent courses, thinking about the meaning of the Christian faith, being more disciplined about daily prayer.

The Ash Wednesday readings offer a good compass for the days ahead. In Psalm 51 the man is acutely aware of his failures before God, but he doesn’t dwell on that negativity. Instead, knowing that God desires ‘truth in the inward being’, he asks ‘for a new and right spirit within me’. Jesus too urges us to take a positive approach to fasting and prayer:

“whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret;

So as we begin Lent, these words from Pope Francis may be helpful. For every fast he suggests a positive reaction:

*Fast from hurting words, and say kind words*

*Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude*

*Fast from anger and be filled with patience*

*Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope*

*Fast from worries and have trust in God*

*Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity*



*Fast from pressures and be prayerful*

*Fast from bitterness and fill your heart with joy*

*Fast from selfishness and be compassionate*

*Fast from grudges and be reconciled*

*Fast from words and be silent so that you can listen.*

So let's listen again to a familiar story: the temptation in the Garden. Notice the subtle psychology that the serpent uses with Eve. First he creates desire: 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"? He knows she'll think she's smarter than the serpent and just have to contradict him!

Once he has her off guard, he can offer 'friendly' information about the forbidden tree: 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' Far from being a loving Father, God has lied to you Eve: I can show you a better way to live.

By taking the serpent's word, what is Eve doing here? She's doubting the goodness and the wisdom of God. This is the sin of pride: she relishes the idea of herself and Adam as God's equals. The more we feel in control, the less important God becomes. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is so seductive because she imagines it will make them independent - but in fact, she's fallen for a lie. Thinking herself strong, in reality she's a victim.

As St. Paul explains, when Jesus resisted temptation, his obedience was a far more powerful act than the disobedience of Adam and Eve. "For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more, **surely**, have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ". There is tremendous strength in his obedience: he shows us the way back to life with God. He faces the same test as Adam and Eve, but he shows us it's possible to overcome the temptation.

I read an excellent commentary on this by Sarah Heaner Lancaster. She says: 'Sin assumes we are independent of God, and so it takes us out of relationship with God.' St Paul talks about the death which came into the world with Adam's sin. This death "exposes the limits of our independence and the falseness of devotion to things of our own creation".

Jesus is physically starving in the desert whilst Adam and Eve have everything they need in their little Eden. But it's Jesus who, in his need, remains fully conscious of his dependence on God. The devil flatters him by calling him, rightly, the Son of God - but Jesus replies **Man** cannot live by bread alone.

Giving up something we're used to during Lent can put us outside our comfort zone and sharpen our sense of what is really important. Yet for every giving up, every abstention, there is, as Pope Francis suggests, a mirror image - a possibility of positive response. Giving up hurting words will create space for kindness to blossom. Fasting from pessimism will open up a way to hope. Listening carefully to the Lenten scriptures can allow them to speak to us more clearly in the here and now.

Looking at the Genesis reading for today, I was really struck by what our disobedience has done to our world. I read it and heard Joni Mitchell's song: "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot." The Garden of Eden speaks to me today about what we've done to our paradise. We constantly hanker



after better things, to manage the world around us to our personal advantage. Have we actually created an improved paradise? We're starting to understand how so many very clever inventions that make life easy and more exciting are having uncomfortable consequences - not just for us but for all life with whom we share our world.

As Pope Francis' words show, one of the most positive things we can incorporate into our Lent meditations is to think about how we can make a personal difference by changing our behaviour. So if we're concerned about the effects of plastics, let's not be consumed by pessimism. Rather, take some positive action: stop buying water or milk in plastic bottles. If we're worried about the negative impact of travelling, we might resolve to drive and fly less, buy more locally, buy fewer products from the other side of the world. Some people will say simple actions like these are a pointless drop in the ocean. That those who try to make a difference are just doing it to feel less guilty. But don't give in to this kind of pessimism: individuals start a general change of attitude. Positive action can become infectious - and a road back to a more hopeful world. As the Genesis verses say: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." Perhaps one way of returning to obedience may be to take seriously our role as keepers of this world for the generations who follow us.

Adam and Eve thought that God had lied to them when he said: "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." The times we are living through show us that God was simply speaking the truth to them: the consequences of turning away from His way are both spiritual and material death.

This week, completely out of the blue, I found a wonderful gift in my postbox. If anyone here is responsible for it, and I have my suspicions 😊, I sincerely thank you - because in the true sense of the word, it's a **lovely** gift: a collection called Love Poems from God .

So I'll end by quoting from one of the poets, Hafiz - a 14th century mystic poet from Persia:

"God said, 'I am made whole by your life. Each soul, each soul completes me.'"

Let's use this Lent as a time of repentance and reflection, and of positive reconnecting with the love that created us. Accepting these weeks as a God-given time to bring ourselves back into that loving wholeness by whom, with whom and in whom we have our being.

Amen