

Saint Thomas and Saint Thomas of the Air Church
 Sexagesima
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 rmcneely+

... receive not the grace of God in vain . . .
 as having nothing and yet possessing all things.

In the Anglo Catholic tradition, we will gather on Ash Wednesday
 in 10 days

in a sobering liturgy to begin the Lenten season;
 The priest will place ashes on our foreheads
 with this startling reminder of our mortality;

Remember o man, of dust thou art
 and to dust thou shall return

We of the Anglo Catholic tradition commit the two cultural taboos
 of the modern church in Lent:

we talk about sin
 and we talk about death.

The two subjects that the church attendance pundits tell us will
 drive people from our pews.

So why do we embark upon this serious
 and somber pilgrimage to the Resurrection
 when the experts direct us
 to pander to the Be Happy liturgy of the mega churches?

Why do we dare to spend 40 days to consider our mortality and to
 take stock of our lives?

Why do we still go through the sacrifice for the fast of Lent?

The plain answer is this:
 the lesson of the ancients holds true after 2000 years.

We speak of the Lenten fast . . . one of those church words
 That we throw around.

The word ‘fast’ immediately evokes notions of starvation,
Refraining from food.

However, “fasting” as the Church uses the term is broader than just food.

A fast can be of anything.

It points to a sacrifice:

Any sacrifice.

Food certainly

But an activity

An object

A pleasure.

It is abstinence in the general sense.

When we join the Lenten Fast with millions of Christians,
when we briefly step outside the world,
when we set aside, even in a minor way,
the cares of the world,
the flesh
and the devil,
and most importantly:

WHEN WE DO IT RIGHT,

And we humble ourselves in submission to a Lenten
discipline

we take a step closer to God
closer to eternity.

The First Sunday Lenten collect says it well:

“That our flesh being subdued to the spirit,
we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness and
true holiness”

When the fast subdues
our fleshly, human distractions
and disquietude;
our minds and hearts can better obey our Lord in true holiness.

Of course the key is in how we go about it.

And that is what I would like to explore with you today.

I was a young teenager when I first met Robert Sherwood Morse. He was the new priest at St Peter's where I had been serving as an acolyte for a number of years. Father Morse was a larger than life figure. Tall and large in stature, he was even larger and taller in spirit.

One of his Lenten sermons has never left me.

He was talking about the Lenten sacrifice

And suggesting what we should think about
Giving up for Lent.

He said we could cut out chocolate and call it a fast

We could not eat deserts and call that a fast.

We could not eat red meat and call that a fast

We could reduce the amount of food we eat

because shedding a few pounds
is something we were thinking of doing anyway
and call that a fast.

(about this point in his sermon, I began to squirm)

He said we could exercise more;

(we've been meaning to do that for some time anyway) and
then call that a fast.

We could read that CS Lewis book someone told us was pretty
good and call that a fast.

(about this point I'm convinced he can read minds the way my
mother seemed to do)

Let's be clear, Father Morse did not condemn any of these Lenten
sacrifices.

But he reminded us that a Holy Lent could be more than what we
give up.

Anything holy is that which is separated out
or set apart from normal life
and dedicated to God.

So a holy Lent is one that is removed from the world
and dedicated to God.

He also said giving something up
leaves a void or a hole in your life.

A space of time or a spot where something was.

He suggested that the fast could be filling in that space, that time.

The expression I want you to know is:
“Fill in your fast”.

Where you have given something up for Lent,
and there is a space or a hole
—fill in the fast.

Keep that concept in mind for a moment—fill in the fast.

Fill in what you give up
with something holy;;
something set apart and dedicated to God.

So here is a challenge but it is not for the faint of heart:

What if this Lent we fasted
from the world?
Set ourselves apart from the world.

Not a huge life changing
40 days in the wilderness type fast
but for some time each day.
A few minutes, a half hour each day.

What if
We fasted from some activity of our lives
The thing you elect to give up for the Lenten fast
And we took that time and devoted it ...to silence.

Filled in the fast
with silence.
Let our minds rest
Let us experience the peace of silence

What if we took that time
and to contemplate
Our lives
Our sins
both those things we have done
and those that we ought to have done.

What if we took that time
in silent contemplation
of that plan
that God had for us
and contemplated how we have measured up to it.

What if we designated a time each day for prayer
and used that time
in solitude and
in the contemplation of God.

What if we dedicated a place in our homes where we could have
solitude
A chair
A table
A room
A nook

What if we filled in the fast
took a walk
Took a drive to the redwoods
and strolled in their majesty in silent prayer
and contemplation.

We live in a frantic and frenzied world.
 Full of confusion,
 contradiction,
 chaos
 cynicism and criticism.

Full of doubt,
 derision,
 destruction,
 division
 and distress.

It is loud,
 it is brash,
 it is rude
 and occasionally it is harsh.

It is fast paced
 with an impossible number of stimuli
 screaming in competition for our attention.

And we are growing incapable
 of devoting any significant time to any single task. Attention
 spans of our children and even ourselves grow shorter every day.

A favorite prayer in the back of the Prayer Book echoes the 46th psalm and prays

“that in returning and rest we shall be saved.
 In quietness and confidence shall be our strength
 By the might of thy Spirit lift us we pray thee to thy presence
 Where we may be still and know that thou art God.”

Jesus went to the wilderness immediately after his baptism to
 prepare himself for his journey to the cross.
 He returned to the wilderness a number of times on the journey.
 Is He telling us by His example
 that the human condition
 requires a modicum of silent contemplation?

I don't know any of us who can spend 40 days in wilderness. But maybe we can spend a few minutes in each of the 40 days of Lent in a wilderness-like silence of our own creation.

To be still and know that He is God.

To let the spirit lift us to God's presence
So the challenge is this:

If we give up/sacrifice some of the time we commonly spend
And fill in the fast—take that time
and at a designated time in each of the 40 days
set aside a half hour or so
and spend that time in silent contemplation
And prayer

Can we but help to
Find the grace of God?
Grow closer to God?

In his Second Epistles to the Corinthian's St Paul told the church at Corinth in his mysterious way:

... receive not the grace of God
in vain
... as having nothing
and yet
possessing all things.

Is Paul saying:
That in the void
or in the nothing of silence
we possess all things?
That when we are still
and there is nothing to drown it out,
we may just be able to hear the voice of God?
In nothing we will find everything?

... receive not the grace of God in vain . . .
as having nothing and yet possessing all things.