

First Sunday of Lent (B) – The Purposes of Penance

Lent is a time for penance – but for what purpose, what reason? There are three good reasons that I can think of.

The first is to **restore** our union with God. In our relationships with each other as fellow human beings we know that we can become somewhat distanced even from those whom we love dearly. Perhaps there has been some thoughtless or careless act, or omission. It may be the mistake of a moment, some small shortcoming in our love – but it can have a detrimental effect upon our closeness to each other. Because we sense that something is lacking in our bond with each other we want to overcome the barrier, to bridge the gap that has come about between us. So we put an effort into some special demonstration of our regard. We might give a present, write a letter, or do something extra that is helpful.

Similarly we can drift away from God, become pre-occupied with our daily concerns, so that we pay our Lord no heed or give him no time. Or maybe we deliberately turn away from him in the heat of the moment when some temptation besets us and we choose to go along with it.

An act of penance is a demonstration of our regret, a declaration of where our heart truly lies, of our desire to be reconciled, to restore and to deepen the bond of love between us.

A second reason for penance is to **refresh** a love that has grown tired and weary. In our human relationships we know how important it is to make spontaneous and generous gestures of affection. We recognise that often we are insensitive towards others, or unsupportive even of those whom we love. But we are moved, on occasion, to be especially kind, to say something fond or encouraging, to be warm and positive in response to requests that are put to us. It is good to do such things – it sustains, heartens, refreshes a relationship that might have become dull, routine, lacking fire and enthusiasm.

Likewise, to bring fresh life and interest to our love relationship with God, it is helpful to make that extra effort which declares how important to us is the bond between us. It will have the effect of revitalising our relationship, of giving it new heart and vigour.

A third reason for undertaking penitential acts of one kind or another is to develop our **spiritual strength**.

We know well enough that *physical* training tones up the body and makes it more energetic, responsive, capable. Athletes are willing to undergo the most rigorous disciplines to achieve their full potential, to attain the prize of victory. Likewise, we can discipline the *mind* so that it becomes more alert, attentive, capable of more sustained effort.

And we can strengthen our *spiritual resilience*, our determination to continue on the demanding journey of faith. We can have a 'holy resolve'. There are certainly times in the life of all of us when a real hardiness of spirit is called for; when we have much to endure; when we need all our resources of inner strength to cope with what has befallen us. The practice of some penitential discipline – doing without some luxury, taking on some extra labour of love – empowers us in our weakness and prepares us for the rigours of life's endurance test.

Perhaps you have already chosen your Lenten Penance and are keeping to it. It is not too late to begin, or to start again!

It could be setting aside a short time for quiet prayer at home; or attending an extra religious service; or just a few moments visiting a church. Maybe a simple act of charity: speaking to someone we find difficult, visiting someone who is sick or housebound; telephoning or writing a letter to someone we think may be lonely or depressed. Or maybe setting some extra portion of our personal funds aside to help the poor in some distant land.

Those who enter track events, or play for sports teams, know that there are times in the race or in the match when there has to be a burst of extra exertion within the overall effort. Those who are champions are those who are willing and able to make that extra effort.

Month by month we make try hard to live good active Christian lives. Sometimes the struggle can seem relentless. But every now and again we have to raise our game. We have to find the resources within us to make a renewed and intensified effort.

During Lent we are challenged to make just such an effort, and it is an effort that we make with one another, as a team, as a community, for our joint victory, our shared glory. Whatever we can do as individuals will redound in the end to the benefit of all. We are in this together, so our effort is not just for our selves but also for our fellows in faith. We each have our part to play, and we each need to play our part – but not only for our own sake: for one another too.