



Sunday 15 March

LENT AND SELF DISCIPLINE

The Reverend Canon
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GUILDFORD
CATHEDRAL

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Opening Prayer

I don't think it is usually a good thing to begin a talk or address with something approaching a disclaimer but, in this case, I'm going to offer not one but two.

The first is to say that preparing and offering this input this morning is helpful for me because, to be honest, when it comes to Lent, I don't believe I have been the world's most disciplined observer.

I was brought up in the sort of church where Lent was barely observed at all and it has taken me a lifetime to arrive at the stage where I welcome and even look forward to Lent because of the opportunity it gives to reflect, to re-set, and to be renewed. On a minor detail, whilst my sweet tooth means that whilst abstaining from alcohol is not hard for me, giving up chocolate for forty days is totally beyond me...

The second disclaimer is to say that the order of these four 'Lent and...' talks resulted from my clergy colleagues and I both expressing interest in particular topics whilst also looking at our diaries to see which dates were and were not possible for us. So the order has been pragmatic, although, in some ways today's topic - Lent and Self-Discipline – might have been a helpful 'starter for ten'.

It might have been a helpful introductory session because, it seems to me, that Self-Discipline is a, if not the, foundation of observing what the liturgy calls a Holy Lent.

And yet these two disclaimers, superficially valid, are themselves distractions. I might not claim to be the most self-disciplined Christian, and the order of these talks might not be perfect, but neither are our Lenten observance and our wider life of faith... because we are human. The most important thing is to use Lent to do something, to develop something, to grow into something, rather than worrying about perfection.

So as today we have arrived at roughly the halfway point between Ash Wednesday and Easter Day, there is still time to consider today's topic fruitfully and, for those of you who have been here in some or all of the previous sessions to integrate the value of Lenten liturgy, Sacramental Confession and

biblical humility into your own Lenten journey.

So where do we begin?

Well with an acknowledgment that Lent requires discipline, and that part of the 'discipline of Lent' is sacrifice; but alongside that, a challenge to popular perspective. Rather than being a dreary and negative few weeks, Lent is actually a positive season. Perhaps you know that the meaning of the word 'Lent' stems from an old English word meaning 'springtime.' It refers less to the dark night of the soul and more to the lengthening of days, the increase of sunshine.

Yes - approached with discipline, Lent will take us into the challenging parts of our behaviour, our personalities and our place among God's people. Why? Because many of us struggle with this word 'discipline'.

We sometimes think of discipline as an external concept, as something that is done to me. And at some point, in the life of faith, and across all areas of our lives, we eventually discover another kind of discipline. It is something that is not external, but which comes from inside – what we call self-discipline.

But here's the thing. Self-discipline is a tool not for inhibition or diminution, but for growth. Observing a disciplined and holy Lent ushers in encouragement by helping us to step out of what is overcast and into the brightness of restored faith, hope and love.

It is often said that there are three pillars of self-discipline in Lent. We encountered them a few weeks ago in the Ash Wednesday gospel through Jesus' triple injunction to embrace fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. Individually and together, fasting, prayer, and almsgiving help us to detach from worldly distractions, and refocus us on our spiritual relationship with God and with others - with the church and the world.

And that's the other aspect of this: although we rightly focus on what we might call our personal piety during Lent, actually we walk through the season towards Easter with others. For a truly rich Lent, we walk through the season together.

Let's think a bit more about the three pillars of Lenten self-discipline:

Fasting: traditionally understood as disciplining the body's physical desires (like food or drink) to strengthen the soul's ability to resist temptation.

Prayer: traditionally understood as disciplining your time and attention to deepen your connection with God and quiet the 'noisy' modern world.

And almsgiving: traditionally understood as disciplining the heart to move beyond selfishness by practicing generosity and service to others.

Because of the old question 'what are you giving up for Lent this year?', I am always initially more interested in the first concept of fasting – and especially if I can give up something other than chocolate! What form might a self-disciplined fast take?

First, there is the fasting from things that are good – food, entertainment, anything we enjoy to the point of taking it for granted. Doing without restores a perspective of gratitude, as well as the awareness that some people don't have even half of what we have in this part of the world. Some people do without altogether.

Second, we can fast from things that are bad for us – maybe fast or fatty food, or forms of entertainment or indulgence that have become a bad, even destructive, habit. We can abstain to try to

change the pattern and balance of our lives.

In my experience, this second form of fasting may be the more challenging for us. What do we need to fast from? From our pettiness or our judgmental attitudes? Our envy or desire for revenge? Do we need to fast from our procrastination, or all those things that waste so much of our time and rob us of life?

Teresa of Ávila, the great Spanish mystic, once said: 'There's a time for penance, and a time for partridge.' In other words, there's a time for fasting and a time for feasting. One does not fast for its own sake. One fasts for the greater good that comes of it. We fast for the feast. And during Lent there is time for both.

If you choose to remove something destructive from your life, you must replace it with something healthy. Removing something leaves a void. If you don't fill it with something else, then after Lent the same old unhealthy stuff will fill the void again. Fast from something destructive and feast on something constructive, something holy.

So, fast from procrastination and feast on action? Fast from worry and feast on prayer? Fast from isolation and feast on friendship? What might those things mean for you in this 'springtime for the soul'? How is the Spirit of God calling you to fast this year?

And prayer? In prayer, we lift up our hearts to the Lord. We express our praise and gratitude, we present our needs, and we open our hearts, surrendering to God's will and power to save. This is particularly important in Lent, as we strive to set right our relationship with God. Prayer connects us with each other and with God, so will we build in more significant time for personal prayer, reflection, or meditation, perhaps by reading Scripture, or a 'Lent Book'?

A life rooted in prayer is a life lived in the context of God's grace. In this regard, prayer sets the stage for what must follow it, so that our actions flow from and reflect what is experienced in prayer. Will we attend additional services of worship, online or, whenever we can, in-person? Will we go on a retreat? Or head in the opposite direction and walk around our streets to pray for our neighbourhood?

In other words, our relationship with God is rooted in prayer, but expressed and manifested in actions. I wonder... might prayer without works verge on the hypocrisy that Jesus consistently chastised in his preaching?

And almsgiving? It is almsgiving—a form of 'taking up'—that makes the 'giving up' work. Almsgiving is understood as giving money or good, to aid the poor; and Lent is a great time to offer additional financial generosity as part of our Christian stewardship.

But in a broader context almsgiving can also be understood to include other kinds of charitable acts of service. We take up works of charity in order to walk more clearly the path of service and love the Lord calls us to walk. In this regard, we remove the excess by giving up, in order to take up (to engage more freely in) what we are really called to do.

Say that I do actually find the strength to give up chocolate, might I give away the money I would spend? Say that I do actually manage to stop spending hours on Facebook, can I use the time to visit a housebound friend? Or to study, read and pray? Say that as I pray more, I come to hear God speaking to me more, and I sense that I need to change a particular pattern in my life? Or that I need to offer some financial support to the needy?

And so we understand that the three Lenten pillars – fasting, prayer and almsgiving – are all part of a piece. For the purpose of Lent is not merely to engage in these practices for the sake of themselves. Lent is about fostering ongoing conversion and renewal of our life in Christ. It is a means of

preparation for the celebration of Easter, and it is a means of preparing for the Paschal feast of heaven.

Now if you are like me, you may start out understanding the theory and be full of good intentions. But remember, we are supposed to be talking about self-discipline. There is something in terms of a determined mental approach here. It is good to try to apply some key mindsets.

First, this is about diagnosis, not punishment. If missing a meal or social media makes you angry, Lent is showing you what 'rules' you. This disciplined 'diagnosis' helps you seek freedom from unhealthy attachments.

Second – and I implied this at the beginning of these reflections - it's about progress over perfection. Failing a Lenten commitment, or starting late, do not 'ruin' Lent. We can use our failures, even our half-heartedness, as lessons in humility and resume or start again immediately.

Third, it's always good to have a specific plan. Vague goals like 'being better' are difficult to realise and all too often will fail. Specific, manageable commitments, like keeping ten minutes of silence daily, are much more effective for building lasting habits.

As I was thinking about this business of being determined and being specific, I came across an article by a secular, business-based commentator – the wonderfully-named Debra Taylor-Hayhurst. Her article is entitled *The Five Cs of Discipline*.

In the article she observes that in a world that glorifies being 'busy', true discipline isn't about doing more — it's about doing what truly matters. We might just note in passing that all too often the Church glorifies being busy too.

So the right sort of discipline is key. Discipline, the article says, is the quiet power that turns intentions into action and dreams into daily habits based upon these *The Five Cs*: Clarity, Commitment, Consistency, Control, and Compassion.

These pan out a little like this.

Without clarity, your energy gets scattered. Clarity means knowing what you want, why you want it, and how it fits into your bigger purpose – to what you think God might be asking you to consider.

Commitment is the decision that you'll keep going — even when the spark fades. It's the promise you make to yourself that says, 'I'm all in,' regardless of how I feel today.

Consistency is the basis of fruitfulness. Progress doesn't come from grand gestures but from small, repeated actions – and often those out of the spotlight rather than those which lend themselves to an audience.

Control isn't about rigidity - it's about focus. In a world full of distractions, self-control keeps you aligned with your priorities (God's priorities?).

Lastly, true discipline includes compassion. You won't always get it right, and that's okay. Compassion allows you to be kind to yourself, reset without criticism, and grow without burnout.

Whilst I am increasingly wary of the management-isation of the Church, there is surely something in these five Cs as a way of checking our Christian self-discipline in Lent as, in the fullest sense, we seek to obey Christ's injunctions to fast, pray and give alms. Perhaps the 5Cs might 'cross-cut' the three pillars in a way that strengthens our resolve.

So, self-discipline in Lent?

A recap:

Self-discipline involves sacrifice, but it takes place within what is intended to be a spiritual springtime not an annual purgatory. Yes, we will be challenged, but also refreshed, restored, and renewed. “There’s a time for penance, and a time for partridge.”

Putting Jesus’ triple injunction to embrace fasting, prayer, and almsgiving into practice releases us into something deeper – ongoing new life in Christ. Really? Yes.

And remember diagnosis not punishment; progress over perfection; having a specific plan; the right sort of discipline – perhaps checked out against the five Cs, or something similar if they don’t work for you.

In the end, we do our best because, in Lent and every day, our loving Lord is inviting us to ‘seek first the Kingdom of God, and God’s righteousness’ – for then all that we need will be given (added) to us, to God’s glory, and that the world may know to come Jesus Christ, the crucified, risen Lord.

[A few moments to talk among ourselves prior to a brief plenary...]

A closing prayer:

Almighty God, by the prayer and discipline of Lent may we enter into the mystery of Christ’s sufferings, and by following in his Way come to share in his glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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