

A Lenten Message from Bishop Bower 2023

Peace be with you!

Today is Ash Wednesday wherein the Church marks the beginning of Great Lent. In this we follow the Scriptural pattern of prayer and fasting set by Moses, Elijah, and our Lord to prepare us for the events ahead. This is a time wherein we should be focusing on getting ourselves right with God and right with our neighbor.

The service for Ash Wednesday is of medieval construction, having been introduced in the 8th Century. In our Anglican tradition we read about it in the writings of Ælfric of Eynsham, an Anglo-Saxon abbot, which tell us that in about the year 1000 the ashes were "strewn" on the head. The making the sign of the Cross in ashes came later. The ashes are properly made from the burning of the palm fronds that were blessed for the previous year's Palm Sunday and returned to the parish for this purpose. There the priest will burn them and mix them with either a little holy water or olive oil as a "fixative".

Ash Wednesday is a solemn time and the 2nd most strict day of fasting and abstinence in the Ordo Kalendar. The Mass includes the "Penitential Office" which is a litany to ask forgiveness. Much of our Anglican celebration of the Mass for Ash Wednesday is actually taken from the Sarum Rite practice and was restored to our use by the 1928 Book of Common Prayer.

In Great Lent we recall that our Lord fasted for 40 days in the wilderness (found in all 3 of the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke), and we seek to follow His example. But if you count up the days between Ash Wednesday and Easter you come up with 46 days instead of 40 days. The reason for this is that there are 6 Sundays in Lent. On Sundays we continue the celebration of the Resurrection of our Lord, on which no fasting and abstinence is to be observed.

The ancient and undivided Church lists the Lenten fast in the Apostolic Constitutions (375 AD) as permitting the consumption of "bread, vegetables, salt and water, in Lent" with "flesh and wine being forbidden. Likewise, Athanasius of Alexandria (339 AD) indicated that the Lenten fast was a 40 day fast for "the entire world".

There is a difference between abstinence and fasting that is worth explaining. Abstinence is 'what' we eat. Fasting is 'how much' we eat. In Lent it is appropriate that we abstain (what we eat) from something that we like to remind us of the sacrifice of Christ. Likewise, we fast (how much we eat) during certain days as part of our prayer offering to God. As an example, I abstain from meat throughout Lent, and I fast on Wednesdays (for the betrayal of Christ) and Fridays (for the crucifixion of Christ) as part of my observance. Your observance of Lent will likely be different as we all are at different places on our spiritual journey.

I once had a parishioner who was trying to observe my pattern of prayer, abstinence, and fasting ask me; "Father, I understand why I should abstain and fast on Fridays (remembering the crucifixion), but why should I fast on Wednesday? Why should I fast for the betrayal of Jesus by Judas?" I replied, "You aren't fasting because Judas betrayed Jesus, you are fasting because of each time that you betrayed Him."

I should also point out that the Church has always taught that abstinence and fasting are NOT observed by those who have health concerns, are aged, and in some cases have other circumstances that would make those practices problematic.

In this I would remind you of the old Anglican saying when it comes to abstinence and fasting, "all should, many do, but none must." After all, fasting and abstinence doesn't change God – it changes you.

So how should you start this practice of fasting, abstinence, and prayer? Many begin by cutting out a favorite food such as chocolate or ice cream. Add to it the deliberate decision to avoid meat on Friday's, remembering the blood of Christ shed for you on the Cross on Good Friday. It's also important to cut down slightly on your food intake (fasting) on Fridays and other days as you are able. All of this must be accompanied by increased prayer. The idea here is to start with a commitment to abstain from things that you like that you can stick to throughout the Lenten season. Together, these form your own Lenten sacrifice to God.

In years to come you can increase your fasting, abstinence, and prayer. Do this and challenge yourself to increase it year over year and you will grow spiritually and so too will your joy.

Our classic Anglican understanding of Lent is one of holy grief that ends in the great joy of Easter. In fact, even the word "Lent" is a shortened form of the Old English word "lencten" which refers to the time of spring. Here our days are getting longer, and the darkness of our world is getting shorter. Even nature is reminding us that, although we are in the darkness of this world, that there is increasing joy that leads to the light of the Resurrection. So that whenever we come to Easter, (Pascha in both Greek and Hebrew, which means Passover), you can celebrate Jesus' victory over death, all death, including your own.

This Lent, I would ask that you increase your prayers for the mission of the Christian faith throughout the world, and especially among classic Anglicans. Pray for our aspirants, postulants, candidates, who are discerning their call to Holy Orders. Pray for our deacons, priests, and bishops, that we may be stirred up to lead the faithful in their charge to spread the Good News of Jesus. Pray for our parishes that each member may grow in their faith and devotion to our Lord. And finally, pray for the increase of the gifts from the Holy Ghost to empower us to become zealous in our outreach and faithful in our service to the Lord and His Church.

"Memento, homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris." Remember, O man, that dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

Praying that you have a blessed and spiritually fruitful Lent,
Bishop Bower

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