



A Short Guide to

LENT

**at the Priory Church of
St Bartholomew the Great
West Smithfield in the City of London**

*The fast, as taught by holy lore,
We keep in solemn course once more:
The fast to all men known and bound
In forty days of yearly round.*

LENT is the period of forty days that ends in Holy Week with the commemoration of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We offer these forty days to God as a gift, using them to prepare for Easter and the renewal of the baptismal covenant. Certain spiritual and religious practices are customarily associated with Lent and we commend them all to you. They are:

- Self-examination, repentance, confession and absolution
- Prayer
- Reading and meditating on God's holy Word
- Fasting and self-denial
- Sharing with others

*O Lord, have mercy upon us miserable offenders;
Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults,
Restore thou them that are penitent.*

Self-examination: Lent is a time for honesty, a time to look deep within and to identify the obstacles to spiritual growth. The biggest obstacle is sin, and we are urged to “acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness” with a “humble, lowly, penitent, and obedient heart” so that we may be forgiven by the infinite goodness and mercy of God. We need to identify where we follow our own ways, rather than God's way, the points at which the “devices and desires of our own hearts” take precedence over the will of God, where we say not “Thy will be done” but “my will be done”. General confession can be made as part of the Ash Wednesday services or at any Eucharist or at Evensong. Those who want or need “further comfort or counsel” are urged by the Prayer book to come to some “discreet and learned Minister of God's Word” to receive the ministry of absolution. All the clergy at St Bartholomew's are willing to provide this ministry together with spiritual guidance. You can speak to a priest after any Sunday or weekday service or an appointment can be made by ringing the Parish Office on 020 7606 5171.

*Almighty and everlasting God, who art always more
Ready to hear than we to pray, and art wont to give
more than either we desire or deserve....*

Prayer: The spiritual and physical disciplines of Lent must be accompanied by prayer, both corporate (participating in the services of

the Church) and private. Prayer takes many forms. In it we praise God, we confess our failings to God, we give thanks to God, and we offer prayers for others. Adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication (ACTS) should all be included in our praying. But we must not simply bombard the Lord God with our words. Praying can be as simple as being still and silent before God. We are not very good at this and we may need help. An icon or other religious picture or a lighted candle may be an aid and a focus to this stillness in which we wait attentively on God, or we may find it helpful to spend a time in a church. The Lady Chapel and the Holy Icon Chapel are especially good for this.

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Reading and Meditating on God's Word: all too often our Bibles are closed when they should be open in our hands and we should be seeking, in the Gospels, in Paul's letters, in the Psalms and in the prophets, God's wisdom shared with us. During Lent, make sure you read your Bible. Start with Mark's Gospel, read it from beginning to end — it takes about 45 minutes to do this. Move on to one of the Epistles — try Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Dip daily into the Psalter, and read the Prophet Isaiah, especially chapters 51-55 and 60-66.

And 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.

Fasting and Self-denial: fasting and abstinence are traditional parts of the Lenten observance. Abstinence is the giving up of certain types of food, meat, for example. Fasting is reducing what we eat in a day. This is achieved by not eating for a part or even the whole of a day, or by limiting the day's eating to one fairly frugal meal. Fasting is fasting — a religious act and an offering to God. It is not dieting. Ability to fast must be taken into consideration; it should not be undertaken by children, the old, or the sick.

The Roman Catholic Church rather generously defines a fast as one meal a day, and two smaller meals — known as collations — which if added together would not exceed the main meal in quantity. The fast is broken by eating between meals and by drinks which could be considered food

(milk shakes, but not milk). The Orthodox Church has strict and rather complex rules which prohibit throughout Lent meat and animal products (eggs, milk, butter, cheese), fish with backbones, oil and wine (and other alcoholic drinks) and encourages an absolute fast — no eating at all — on certain days. Our fasting needs to be appropriate to our spiritual and physical needs.

St John Chrysostom says this of fasting: “Fasting is a medicine; but a medicine, though it be never so profitable, becomes frequently useless owing to the unskillfulness of him who employs it. For it is necessary to know, moreover, the time when it should be applied, and the requisite quantity of it; and the temperament of body that admits it; and the nature of the country, and the season of the year; and the corresponding diet; as well as various other particulars; any of which, if one overlooks, he will mar all the rest that have been named.” And he continues: “I have said these things, not that we may disparage fasting, but that we may honour fasting; for the honour of fasting consists not in abstinence from food, but in withdrawing from sinful practices; since he who limits his fasting only to an abstinence from meats, is one who especially disparages it.”

“Dost thou fast? Give me proof of it by thy works!
Is it said by what kind of works?
If thou seest a poor man, take pity on him!
If thou seest an enemy, be reconciled to him!
If thou seest a friend gaining honour, envy him not!
If thou seest a handsome woman, pass her by!
For let not the mouth only fast, but also the eye, and ear, and the feet, and the hands, and all the members of our bodies.”

Sharing: Lent requires positive action as well as self-discipline. First, we can share the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, with others. And if we feel unable to testify directly, we can at least refer to our religious observance and our gratitude to God for his goodness towards us. Second, we can consider those who suffer and do something to help them. Use Lent to consider, for example, the starving of the world, and, from the money saved by fasting and abstinence, give something to meet their needs.

The Clergy are available throughout Lent (and indeed at any other time) to hear confessions, to give spiritual counsel, or to discuss any matter.

Revised edition 2007