

St. Mark Study Guide

Lent: Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving

“Have mercy upon me O God according to thy loving kindness; according to the multitude of thy loving kindness blot out my transgressions.” Psalm 51



Feasting: Shrove Tuesday

“Wherever the Catholic sun doth shine, There’s always laughter and good red wine. At least I have heard it so, Benedicamus Domino” - Hilaire Belloc

The liturgical year is a sacred ordering of time in preparation for the return of Christ. As such, the liturgical year has ordinary time, feasts and fasts. Shrove Tuesday is the day before Ash Wednesday. It is not a feast *per se*, but Shrove Tuesday is a reminder to prepare for the



discipline of Lent. Mardi Gras is rooted in this tradition of joyful preparation. As religion declines, healthy practices like Mardi Gras can be degraded. Pleasure, sought for its own sake, will corrupt us. There is no good in a festive Mardi Gras not immediately followed by a Lent.

There are deeper and more fundamental rhythms to human life than our fascination with power, technology and success. We are the richest nation in history and yet are angry, deeply divided and unhappy. We have a common humanity separated by fascination with things rather than by the meaning of our life and history. The Liturgical Year invites us to enter into the human story rooted in the divine.

Lent

“The word “Lent” comes from the Old English word *lencten*, which means “spring.” The season of Lent reminds us that we are all in need of renewal. When asked in an interview, “What’s wrong with the world today?” the Catholic author G. K. Chesterton is said to have replied, “I am.” In Lent, all Christians must admit the same.” *Musick, Melissa; Keating, Anna (2016-02-23). The Catholic Catalogue: A Field Guide to the Daily Acts That Make Up a Catholic Life (p. 78). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.* Lent is a liturgical season. “The word ‘liturgy’ comes from a Greek term meaning “public work or work done on behalf of the people.” Liturgy always referred to an organized community. A work, then, done by an individual or a group was a liturgy on behalf of the larger community. All the worshipers are expected to participate

actively in each liturgy, for this is holy “work,” not entertainment or a spectator event. Every liturgical celebration is an action of Christ the High Priest and of his Mystical Body, which is the Church. It therefore requires the participation of the People of God in the work of God. Liturgy is centered on the Holy Trinity. At every liturgy the action of worship is directed to the Father, from whom all blessings come, through the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit. We praise the Father who first called us to be his people by sending us his Son as our Redeemer and giving us the Holy Spirit so that we can continue to gather, to remember what God has done for us, and to share in the blessings of salvation.” *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) (2012-04-02). United States Catholic Catechism for Adults (Kindle Locations 3711-3714). United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Kindle Edition.*

“Through the liturgical celebrations and seasons of the Church, we participate in the Paschal Mystery of Christ, that is, his passing through death, from this life into eternal glory, just as God enabled the people of ancient Israel to pass from slavery to freedom through the events narrated in the Book of Exodus (cf. Ex 11-13). The liturgical seasons and liturgy teach us Christ, the meaning of the mysteries we are celebrating and the reality that is both visible and hidden. Jesus Christ’s death and Resurrection becomes present to us. The term liturgy itself has a broader application than that of Sacrament, for it embraces all the official public prayer life of the Church, while the term Sacrament refers to a particular celebration of Christ’s salvific work.” CCC

Lent and Sin

Sin wounds our relationship with God and others. Sin undermines our human dignity. Reflecting on the moral understanding of the Church in Faith reveals the destructive force of sin in our lives and the world. To understand how we are misshapen requires that we have an image of a whole person in mind. Christ and the saints are whole persons. The path to wholeness and God is the process of conversion initiated by his grace that we participate in daily. The return to God includes sorrow for sin and the resolve to sin no more. CCC Liturgy is a participation in the life of sanctifying grace.

Liturgical Seasons and the sacred ordering of time

Christians believe that God, who created the universe and everything in it, also created the divisions between light and darkness that we call “day” and “night.” And if God saw fit to mark time and distinguish different periods of time, so must we. One of the ways the Church divides the day and the night is with times of prayer. These prayers are anchored by the psalms, and the psalms for each time. We call this daily cycle of prayer the Liturgy of the Hours. (You may also have heard it called the ‘breviary.’) “Hours” does not signify the length of the prayer, but its use at a particular time, or hour, each day and night. In its full form the Liturgy of the Hours consists of eight specific times for prayer. (If you divide a twenty-four-hour day by eight, you’ll get prayer every three hours.) Since the Christian day, like the Jewish day, begins at sunset, let’s begin there. Musick and Keating.

Sunday: The Lord's Day

Christians often speak of Sunday as the Sabbath, but it is historically known as the Lord's Day. The Sabbath for the Jewish people is from Friday at sundown to Saturday at sundown. The Lord's Day has been celebrated by Christians from the earliest time because it was the first day of the ancient week, that is the day of the Resurrection. It is never a fast day, but is always a feast. Sundays are not included in counting the forty days of Lent. Many Catholics observe their Lenten promises on the Lord's Day, but it is not strictly necessary.

Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday. At this Mass we receive ashes on our foreheads in the shape of a cross, although sometimes it looks like a smudge. Anyone can receive ashes. The ashes are the burned palm fronds from the previous year's Palm Sunday. They symbolize our mortality and sinfulness, our need for repentance and repair. "The person distributing the ashes will typically say (from Genesis 3: 19), "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." Hearing this signed on your forehead and the foreheads of those you love is a powerful reminder of the truth that we are all going to die. Sometimes the person distributing the ashes will say (from Mark 1: 15), "Repent, and believe the Gospel." On Ash Wednesday Catholics fast, abstain from meat, and contemplate their sins. Wearing ashes on one's forehead until they wear off of their own accord echoes the ancient practice of putting on sackcloth and ashes as a sign of mourning or penance. In the early Church the ashes were actually sprinkled on top of one's head. As it says in the book of Job 42: 6, "I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Musick and Keating

Lent is forty days

Lent lasts forty days and does not include Sundays or the Triduum. Forty days is a symbolic period of time. Jesus fasted for forty days, the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years and the number forty appears elsewhere in scripture.

Remember, this is about ordering the passage of time in a sacred manner. "When we fast we attempt to imitate Jesus, and we stand in solidarity with the poor and those who go hungry." Musick and Keating.

- **Prayer** can be done at all times. It is a good practice to take on a new prayer discipline during lent. Try saying the rosary this Lent each day. Commit to the stations of the cross with the parish each Friday of Lent. A good meal follows at St. Mark. Ask for God's grace and listen to his answer.
- **Fasting** is an exercise in self-denial and self-control to build discipline in our life Jesus fasted in the desert for forty days and was tempted by the devil to turn a stone into bread (Luke 4: 1-13). Catholics are required to fast from food on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and to abstain from meat on Fridays during Lent. (Young children, the elderly, pregnant women, and people with medical conditions are not required to



participate in the fast. If you need to eat for medical reasons, do so.) The Church encourages us to continue this fast, in some form, throughout the year on Fridays. Fasting has long been understood as a proper way to mark Christ's passion. Think about the events that led from the Garden of Eden to Gethsemane: Adam and Eve refused to hear and obey God's word regarding the tree of life. They ate what was not theirs to eat. Fasting, then, is a way of acknowledging that there are holy boundaries around our lives and our behaviors. Not every bit of food within our sight and reach is good for us to take both for our physical and spiritual well-being. On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, Catholics fast and abstain, permitting themselves two small snacks and one modest meal.

- **Almsgiving** is a feast for the poor. "The money saved from abstaining from something, like meat, or shopping, or your daily coffee drink, should be given to the poor. This money can be placed in an alms box or rice bowl and then given to the Church, Catholic Charities, Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Relief Services, or some other charitable organization on Holy Thursday. Encourage your children and grand-children to give something up and give to those in need. The corporal works of mercy are feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and burying the dead. If you have small children, it shouldn't be tough to clothe the naked or give drink to the thirsty. If you live alone, you might need to be a bit more creative. Practicing hospitality is also an aspect of almsgiving. Consider having people over for a fish supper on a Friday during Lent. You and your family will come to associate fried fish with the season." Musick and Keating.

PRAYER, FASTING AND ALMSGIVING IS IMPORTANT AND FREEING! DO IT JOYFULLY!

Palm Sunday and Making Palm Sunday Crosses

"All glory, laud, and honor to thee, redeemer, king: To whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring." - Bishop Theodolf of Orléans, Ninth Century



Palm Sunday, the final Sunday of the Lenten Season, is the beginning of Holy Week. You will take a blessed palm at mass that Sunday. A beautiful tradition is to take the palm home, weave it into a cross and hang it somewhere in your home for the year. Return it to the parish before lent begins to be burned to ashes and used on Ash

Wednesday. Lent comes to its conclusion at the beginning of the Easter Triduum, that is Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. We will discuss that sacred time further as it approaches. Until then, "We venerate your cross, O Lord, we praise and glorify your holy resurrection: because of the wood of the tree, joy has come into the whole world." *Glenstal Book of Prayer*

Traditional Devotion in Lent

Stations of the Cross

“At the very least, they can be persuaded that the bodily position makes no difference to their prayers; for they constantly forget, what you must always remember, that they are animals and that whatever their bodies do affects their souls.” —advice from a master demon to his apprentice, C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

“If we associate prayer only with silent meditation or prayers read or spoken as we sit quietly, it’s possible to begin to think of prayer as a purely mental exercise. The wisdom of the Church lies in its understanding of Christianity as enfleshed. What we think matters, but not nearly so much as what we do. The Church has many walking prayers, and probably the best known is the Stations of the Cross. We know from the diary of Egeria, a fourth-century pilgrim to Jerusalem, that a long procession following Jesus’s Way to the Cross was part of Holy Week observances in the early church. She writes that early on Good Friday morning the pilgrims would go “at the first cockcrow... to the place where the Lord prayed, as it is written in the Gospel.” From there, she writes, “all, even to the smallest child, go down with the bishop, on foot, with hymns to Gethsemane.” There they would pray, sing a hymn, and listen to a reading from Matthew’s Gospel recounting Jesus’s arrest.” Musick and Keating. Each Friday of Lent, we have the Stations of the Cross at 6 pm followed by a meatless soup supper. Joyfully treat yourself even when fasting!

Questions for Discussion

1. We are concerned about dieting in a nation flush with food. What is the difference between dieting and fasting?
2. Some Catholics say, eating fish on Fridays is not hard. Why does the Church bother to require meatless Fridays?
3. Do you think prayer is merely a mental exercise? What role does the sacramentality of the body play in your prayer life?
4. Do you give much thought to the corporal works of mercy as almsgiving? What role do they play in your life?
5. How might a dying person think about the sacred nature of time? How do you think about it?

Suggested Lenten Reading

Mercy in the City: How to Feed the Hungry, Give Drink to the Thirsty, Visit the Imprisoned, and Keep Your Day Job by Kerry Weber.

The Catholic Catalogue: A Field Guide to the Daily Acts That Make Up a Catholic Life Musick, Melissa; ; Keating, Anna (2016-02-23).