

## Monastic Scribe LXVII: February 2, 2024

### TO DUST YOU WILL RETURN

Christmas is followed by Valentine's Day which is followed by Easter. That's our religious cycle these days. Commercial ads, sometimes subtly and sometimes directly, want us to celebrate by spending more. Valentine's Day this year (February 14th) might confuse us because it is Ash Wednesday and people might go to supper with a black smudge on their brows. A bit comical in my view. Oh my, what's a girl to do? Ash Wednesday is not the real challenge. It is rather a forty day period which we call Lent. Will you arrive at Easter and regret you never got into Lent?

When I was a boy, giving up something, e.g. candy, was the heart of Lent. Learning to curtail my appetites was good training. There was also an element of helping others. One thing I remember is having a small cardboard mite box in which I could donate my pennies. On Holy Thursday my mother would take me over to Saint Francis Church in Manhattan where I could give in my savings. Looking back, there was something profound about this. I was giving to missionaries and poor children around the world. There was a connection in what I did and the needs of others. No, I didn't think of it in these terms but, subconsciously, I was being one with people beyond me.

Lent for an adult calls for something more profound and spiritual. Fasting, especially if connected with prayer and almsgiving, remains a good thing to do. But Lent is a journey with Jesus Christ and all my fellow Christians. It calls for going deeper into my interior life and more consciously living out my baptism vows. "For me to live is Christ," said Saint Paul and Lent is a time that I focus more clearly on my oneness with all who are one in Christ.

What should I be doing in Lent? Forget the candy routine. But give up something that leaves you time to be more silent, more prayerful, more conscious of your spiritual life. Time for silence, time for getting beyond my busy and self-centered activity certainly helps. Should you be doing more, or maybe less? I caution people not to rush to Mass every day. If you are going to Mass, do so in a prayerful manner – be on time, listen attentively to the scriptural readings, and join with Christ in giving your life to God. If you can't do that slowly and reverently, stay home and meditate on the day's readings. Lent was originally a time to prepare for Baptism and those preparing did not go to Mass. Nor did

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those practicing Penance go to Mass. Silence and meditation prepare us for Easter. Saint Benedict says we should look forward with joyful longing to Easter. That's really what Lent is about! Joyful longing!

The scripture readings during Lent have two perspectives. The first one is to open oneself to conversion. We do this by quietly looking at our lives, focusing on self-knowledge and self-acceptance. The commandments and practices of Lent should help us to be more mindful and conscious of ourselves, our faults and sinfulness, our need for God's mercy. The scripture readings offer many ways to do this. The need for silence, reflection, honest and vulnerable acceptance of self are all means to this end. If our practices make us feel better about ourselves, we have missed the mark.

The second perspective is to come closer to Jesus Christ. To know, understand, appreciate and even feel his word to us, and especially the meaning of his death and resurrection. Many scripture readings throughout Lent at Mass turn us toward Jesus but especially the readings in the last three weeks of Lent veer us away from self-examination to knowing Jesus, talking to him, trying to understand how we are to follow him and really find the meaning of our lives in doing so. Can we really see in Jesus how he had to let go of his own ways, empty himself of his ego, and learn to love everyone even to the point of giving himself to others?

In a shorter fashion, here are some hints of how to live Lent. First do not add a lot of prayers and practices; maybe you should do less, not more. Don't be busy! Give some time for silence, for reflection, for a quiet walk, for reading about other people in the world especially those who are suffering with Jesus on his cross. Be quiet enough to be able to really listen to Jesus in the scriptures, Jesus in the world, Jesus in each other, Jesus in the poor and disadvantaged. The word "listen" is key. That, and the silence it needs within us in order to listen, may take some time to develop a regular habit. Maybe stop your smart phones, your television, your need to converse with Siri or Alexa.

Lent is a time of grace. It is an opportunity to grow more deeply in our spiritual life. It is supported by other people on this planet, Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants and others who are at prayer with us. Together, we are the body of Christ and Jesus is our head showing up the way. I am writing this a bit before Lent begins so you can give some time in planning how you might spend this holy

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time. Yes, it has much to do in how you are bringing Christ to a war torn, uncivil, contentious world. Everything is connected. You can drop me a short note to tell me how you are doing so I can support you in my prayer. I'll be praying at [joycet@glastonburyabbey.org](mailto:joycet@glastonburyabbey.org) I pray you have a joyful and fruitful Lent.

**Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL**

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.