

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Ash Wednesday
February 18, 2015

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Among other things Lent is about *fasting*. And it is interesting to compare the fast described in the 58th chapter of Isaiah with the invitation of Our Lord Jesus in the 11th chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel. In the Old Testament the fast involved the breaking of the yoke and bondage to evil ways. But Christ speaks of *His* service as perfect freedom. He tells us "Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden light, and you will find rest for your souls."

Lent is one part of our reply to the Lord's invitation. Lent will be a time of special discipline. But the effect of any truly Christian discipline is always *liberty*. A right use of Lent brings liberty from the bonds of our sins and shortcomings. What Isaiah said is true. But the Lenten discipline also brings liberty to serve Christ as He ought to be served.

That is the principle we are to have before us as we begin today our observance of Lent. We are to take the yoke of Christ upon us and learn of Him. We are to concentrate upon *Him* instead of upon ourselves. Yes indeed our efforts of self-denial: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, will necessarily be shaped by our own different circumstances and needs. There is always need for honest self-examination and assessment! But those self-denials will find their meaning and joy in that we have been *able to offer something to Jesus*.

Some of your Lenten discipline cannot be kept secret. People may notice you starting to come to daily Mass. They might notice you refusing normally accepted social invitations. You might skip a daily meal or abstain from meat on a second day each week. People will whisper that "you're getting religion!" But for the most part your Lenten observance will be *an interior living for God*. He will know what you are doing! To all others you will show the ordinary outward forms of cheerfulness and charity. Remember that any rule of life which fuels a feeling of superiority over others is quite useless. That is because self-pride hinders our learning of the One Who told us He is meek and lowly in heart.

And then if it has been a *good* Lent, forty days from now you will not sigh in relief and say, "Thank goodness it's over!" For it will have made you a better and more consistent Christian disciple. When Easter comes the spiritual gains will be

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abiding. And this is as it should be. Our Christian duty is to continue growing in the faith and fear of the Lord, and in response to the promptings of His Holy Spirit in our lives.

Remember that Lent is not a time to be miserable *for its own sake*. You can let this terrible winter take care of that! Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting were never the discovery of Lenten discipline anyway. They are actually the Epiphany gifts of the three kings refined by the Holy Cross. Those kings brought gold, frankincense and myrrh. But those who live in the shadow of the Cross, and the power of the Lord's Resurrection realize our gifts must involve *sacrifice*. Ever since Calvary our response must be like that of King David of old, who was unwilling to offer to the Lord without cost to himself.

So for gold we offer alms. For frankincense we offer prayer. For the gift of myrrh we fast. In these ways Christians offer themselves in response to the great love of Christ for us and in response to that great invitation of His: "Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy, and My burden light, and you will find rest for your souls." The Gospel is quite clear about one thing: We will find our rest in Jesus Christ and in no place else.