

Fasting and Abstinence

To fast is to do without food; its purpose is to experience the effects of not eating. It also serves to be a penance or a sacrifice - for the purpose of strengthening us. When we don't eat, even for a little while, we get hungry. When we get hungry, we have a heightened sense of awareness. If, when we eat too much, we have a sluggish feeling; when we fast, we have a feeling of alertness. Fasting is a wonderful exercise whenever we want to sincerely ask for an important grace from God. It is not that our fasting "earns" God's attention, but by fasting, we clarify our thinking and our feeling. It is purifying and prepares us to pray more deeply.

Abstinence refers specifically to abstaining from meat. Its purpose is to be an act of penance - an act of sacrifice - that helps us grow in freedom to make much bigger sacrifices. By ancient tradition, abstinence is encouraged on Fridays. For vegetarians it might be possible to abstain from a non-meat meal on Fridays, and especially during Lent. It should be noted that many people in this world cannot afford to eat meat or do not have access to it. Part of our abstaining from meat can place us in solidarity with so many of our sisters and brothers around the world.

O Sing unto the Lord

The Litany is a form of prayer consisting of a series of petitions to which the people make set responses. It is thought to have originated in Antioch during the 4th century but soon spread to Rome. Pope Gelasius (492-96) introduced a Litany into the mass of which the Kyrie eleison alone survives. Two hundred years later the pattern of Litany for the Western Church throughout the Middle Ages was established under Pope Sergius in The Litany of the Saints, and it is from this that the roots of the Litany as found in the Book of Common Prayer are to be found. Today we are so used to singing or saying Litanies in many different forms that we often take this unique form of prayer for granted. During the Lenten season we are asked to make space in our lives to prepare ourselves fully to meet Christ anew at the Easter Feast. Perhaps take time to pray the Litany one day each week as part of your preparations?

Prayers to Remember

O LORD, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights: Give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness and true holiness, to thy honour and glory, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

Collect for the First Sunday in Lent, Book of Common Prayer (1662)

21st February
2021

The First Sunday
of Lent

Forty Days and Forty Nights



'The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness and he remained there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan. He was with the wild beasts, and the angels looked after him.' (Mark 1. 12-13)

Each year, on the first Sunday of Lent, we read one of the synoptic accounts of the temptations of Jesus in the desert by Satan. Mark's version of the temptation in the desert is much shorter than Matthew's or Luke's. This makes the significance more direct. The same Spirit who descended on Jesus in his baptism now drives him into the desert for forty days. This is a moment of radical confrontation with Satan who wants to frustrate the work of God. The wild beasts represent the danger of the desert, and the angels remind us of the angel who supplied food for Elijah in the wilderness (1 King 19:5-7). In the desert, Jesus faces good and evil, but his obedience brings forth the new people of God where Israel's rebellion had brought death and alienation. In the plan of God, Jesus was not to proclaim the good news of salvation prior to the termination of the Baptist's mission. But now is the time of fulfillment: the reign of God has begun in Jesus and it calls for a radical response: "Repent, and put all your trust in the gospel!" What will you do this Lent to root and deepen your trust in God, the true source of life and hope?