



DIOCESE OF SALFORD

*Pastoral Letter of
The Right Reverend Terence J Brain
Bishop of Salford*

Dear Family of God in the Salford Diocese,

Are you ready for it: the forty days of Lent? All limbered up and ready to go with mortifications and extra prayers? Do we see Lent as a kind of Krypton Factor spiritual assault course that starts on Ash Wednesday and finishes at Easter when we can check our score against each other to see who is the winner with five points towards a heavenly total? There is a little bit of this in all of us: a little bit of a risk in all of us that we see Lent as depending on our good efforts. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church we are taught that Lent is when “the Church unites herself each year to the mystery of Christ in the desert.” (CCC540) This means that Lent depends on Christ and not on us. During Lent, Christ invites us to unite ourselves to Him in His forty days in the desert.

What did Christ do for the forty days in the desert?

First thing He did was respond to the Spirit: “The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness...” (Matt 1:12) Then if we are to unite ourselves to Jesus, we must allow the Spirit of God to do the same to us. So the first thing we do at the beginning of Lent is trust the Holy Spirit. Trust ourselves to the Spirit of God. Trust our families to the Spirit of God. Trust our world to the Spirit of God. “Come Holy Spirit into the hearts of your faithful, and kindle within us the fire of your love....and You shall renew the face of the earth.” This is what Jesus did in the desert: opened himself to the love of his Father, so that he had the power to proclaim the Good News, and not be distracted from his purpose – to lead all souls to God.

Christ’s time in the desert was a deepening of his relationship with the Father. If we are uniting ourselves to Christ, then our Lent also must be a period of knowing and loving God more deeply. This is “prayer”: quality time with God. So now our prayers during Lent are not weighed by numbers of rosaries said, candles lit, masses heard and so on, but rather – like the old man in the village of Ars – each day looking at God and letting God look at us. Growing closer to each other.

Sometimes we are afraid to let God look at us: he will see all the smudgy bits that we ourselves would prefer not to look at, let alone God look at them! Doesn't this seem a strange way of relating to God? Maybe that is because we still see God as one who judges rather than one who loves and is merciful. St Therese of Lisieux, whose relics will be brought through the dioceses of England and Wales later this year, taught us that if we don't trust God we will end up being afraid of Him. The mystery of Jesus in the desert is that he was never afraid to love, and so he was able to receive love from the Father and the Spirit. Saint Therese once said to a sister who was basing her relationship with God on His justice: "Sister, you want God's justice, you will get God's justice. The soul receives exactly what it expects from God." So during Lent when we expect to do penance and self mortification we need to look into the mystery of Christ in the desert to understand that the motive for our mortification is not to appease the justice of God, but to surrender into his love, and to trust. As St Augustine taught: "Trust the past to the mercy of God, the present to his love, and the future to his providence." Because of the time Jesus spent in the mystery of his Father's love in the desert, so on the Cross he was able to declare: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit". If we can say "Amen" to this then, yes, we are ready for Lent and to unite ourselves to the mystery of Jesus in the desert.

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*Given at Wardley Hall on Saturday, 21st February,
and appointed to be read in all churches and chapels of the diocese
on the weekend of February 28th and 29th, 2009, the First Sunday of Lent*