

## *Fasting fit for the Twenty-first Century*

A Sermon preached at the Guild of Air Pilots Installation Service,  
St Michael, Cornhill, 17 March 2010  
by the Rector, Rev'd Dr Peter Mullen

Well, here we are in the middle of Lent. This is one of the most important seasons in the Christian Year. Christian feast days—Christmas, Easter—are for exuberance and rejoicing. Have yourself a holy knees-up. But in Lent we are asked to turn aside for a few weeks and pay attention to the inner substance of our faith and to do a bit of spiritual auditing on ourselves. Naturally, at such a deeply significant time we don't entirely trust to our own devices but turn to our great church leaders, our Fathers-in-God—and these days, not forgetting our Mothers-in-God. So how for instance are the powers-that-be in the Church of England telling us to deepen our spiritual awareness this Lent?

The bishops say us we should *cut up our vegetables more thinly* to save cooking time—especially carrots which should be cut into strips. We should boil our broccoli—or better still steam it—not for long, though. The Bishop of Liverpool has taken to driving around in an electric car, like some cosmodemonic Noddy, and he says we should go on a *carbon fast*. Apparently, the planet—where is this *planet* by the way? Do they mean Earth?—will soon be destroyed by that life-giving gas, carbon dioxide, unless we go easy on the mobile phones and *Blackberries*. Planet? May we ask what planet these bishops are on?

We should give up *iphones* and *Facebook* for Lent too. God, if they do that, whatever will the modern parsons find to do with their time! Insofar as the hierarchy of the Church of England do any thinking at all, they certainly don't go in for joined-up thinking. They have called for us to cut down our childish obsession with electronic gadgets—an obsession that has broken out everywhere, like nappy-rash. But at St Lawrence Jewry the ever-so-cool Incumbent there surprised the ancient and wholesome Plough Monday Service—in the presence of the Lord Mayor—by asking the congregation to hold their portable phones and *Blackberries* aloft so he could bless them. As the clergy saw from a press release—an electronic press-release—next day, this had all been a great wheeze to attract *publicity*.

Moreover, if the bishops really want us to cut down on hi tech, perhaps they ought to have thought twice before launching another of their Lent Programmes called [www.sayoneforme.org](http://www.sayoneforme.org), in which members of the public are invited to go on line and type in a prayer request to any one of selected bishops. When you've finished your prayer, all you need to do is press the *Amen* button and the bish will pray it for you.

You might have thought of laying off the chocolates or the booze for Lent. No need really. Well, women don't need to anyhow. For we are advised in a book by a trainee lady priest—the book is called *How to Look Good Naked*—that we don't need to feel embarrassed about being fat. Of course it is not put uncouthly like that. She says, *Some of the early church Fathers were very negative about sexuality. I want to break down those barriers and help women maintain a healthy self-esteem.* So much for Our Lord's teaching that *yourself* is the very thing you must not *esteem*. It's called the sin of pride.

This trainee lady priest shows she surely has trainee lady bishop qualities. She goes on, *It's not spiritually shallow to be concerned about how you look. I think*

women should embrace that—knowing that you are loved by yourself . . . . Yes, well, there are words for that sort of goo: none of them suitable for our Installation Sermon.

But you need not think you are left comfortless, like sheep without so many shepherds in Lent 2010. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York are taking seriously their responsibility for the spiritual life of the nation. They recently wrote the Foreword to three booklets to guide us through Lent: one for *The Family*; one for *Adults and Youth* and the other for *Kids*. Dutifully, I bought copies of all three.

These holy and inspired booklets feature *Mr Men* style cartoon pictures who we must suppose are meant to represent the general public. Achingly politically-correct with all races represented but—that trainee lady priest who wants us to love ourselves please note—no fat people or smokers. The booklets urge us to *Do fun things together. Create a space in your home . . . a corner of a room . . . an understairs cupboard . . . a shelf . . . make a prayer den using furniture and blankets . . . gather some objects that are fun to touch, feel and smell.* (Better be careful there.) They suggest, *a piece of velvet, feathers, a tray of sand, lavender bags or pine cones.* These should be enough to satisfy at least some of the more mentionable fetishists among us.

And what are we supposed to do in the prayer space? *Take in some pebbles, shells or feathers*—presumably this is to demonstrate our impeccable ecumenical relations with primitive animists and tree-huggers. And prayers are supplied: *Dear God, make wrong things right . . . .* But is this infantilised wishful thinking addressed to God, Father Christmas or the Tooth Fairy? We are educated into the correct manual acts to perform while praying this desolate prayer: *Shake your finger from side to side for “wrong” and then do thumbs up for “right”.* As I read this, I felt another gesture coming on. You feel there should be a caution not to perform these manual acts near a window in case the neighbours see you and phone for the men in white coats.

Lent involves us in acts of practical kindness too. So, they suggest, *Give a lollipop to your lollipop person.*

Of course, as always in the Church of England these days, the sheer blithering inanities only faintly disguise the ideological-political hard sell:

*Email or write to your MP about a global poverty issue . . . . Buy a fair Trade Easter egg.*

The only orthodoxy we find in these booklets is environmentalist demagoguery and the pagan superstition of global warming: *Help lighten our load on the planet . . . defrost your fridge and find out how climate change affects poorer people . . . help stop global climate change: recycle your rubbish, save trees, use both sides of the paper . . . .* For what exactly?

The point is that the Church should be the *antidote* to all this guff, gimmicks, publicity-mongering. But instead we see a decadent Church—so empty of intelligence and inspiration—delighted to copy the worst popular fads promoted by the puerile mass media. Any wheeze will do for the modern bishops and parsons. Whereas the whole point of Lent is simply to draw nearer to Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. You might be helped in this by giving something up. But don't set too much store on that: if you fail, you'll be abject; if you succeed, worse, you'll be insufferable.

Do something real. Don't suffuse the faith in gimmicks and wheezes. Take a dose of the faith neat, like a glass of whisky. I mean, carve out five minutes anytime in the day to be quiet and give thanks for your life. Read one of the Psalms each day. Read a chapter of St Mark's Gospel every day between now [March 17th] and Easter. There are only sixteen chapters, so you can get that done easily.

But above all take comfort in the truth that you're not meant to try to screw up religious feelings in yourself in a fitful seasonal attempt to draw near to Jesus Christ. For the glorious truth is that he draws near to you. Here for you he enters Jerusalem. He sweats blood for you in the Garden of Gethsemane. The Crown of Thorns he wears for you. The mock purple robe. The flogging to within an inch of his life. For you. And the clatter of the execution party. The shouts of the mob. The hammering of the nails. The vinegar to drink and the darkness at noon. All for you. For you he lies in the sepulchre. And on Easter morning he bursts from the tomb so that you may share his life for ever.

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§ The ordinary Christian view of fasting is lucidly explained in "Of Good Works and first of Fasting", one of the Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches published by The Brynmill Press Ltd.