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## Lenten Comfort

Lent is a comforting season. Even when we stare our sins straight in the face and we are perplexed by offenses all too familiar, Lent envelops us with rest and ease.

You might think that this is a blatant contradiction. This season of penitence, fasting, and alms giving requires self-control and unselfish regard for the needs of others. Rest and ease come at the end of Lent. Au contraire!

Consider the liturgical setting. Much of our splendid artwork is taken out of the Church. The services are simpler and ornamented with less ceremony; the vestments are less colorful. It is as if we have removed ourselves to a liturgical wilder-ness, led by the Spirit to take account of our souls.

Now, set in our liturgical wilderness, we take account of our conscience. What we discover are things done and left undone, sins of commission and sins of omission, old habits unchanged and as Eliot wrote, "things late revealed which once we took for virtue."

But the conscious awareness of our sinfulness is not all that we realize. We also discover that with the conscience come impure motives that we rationalize, and other vices that we do not fully understand. The wicked fact is this. We do not want to understand our hidden vices and presumptuous sins, because if we did, we should have to do something about them.

Well, gracious me! If this is our true state, if "there is no health in us," where is the comfort?

Comfort lies in the liturgy, especially in the Word of God written, and in the Blessed Sacrament. Through the Prayer Book, and in the hymns and sermons (I hope), in hearing the lectionary and in receiving Holy Communion, something happens to us.

First, this solitary wilderness helps to clear the fog of spiritual chaos from our minds. We learn more of what and who we are because we learn more of what and who God is. And second, the more we learn of God and of ourselves; the more we rely upon His grace and power.

We should not underestimate the power of this learning. But to estimate it accurately means that we shall have to be honest about our

sinfulness. The season of Lent is really a worm's eye view of the spiritual life. It is an intensive spiritual journey, if we allow it to be so. The real value of Lent is not a legalism of giving up chocolate, or alcohol, or coffee. Fasting is of no benefit against the flesh, if we ignore the mind and heart. What we are really faced with are the dark sins of egotism, malicious gossip, and our own selfish will, to mention only a few. As St. Anselm taught, unless we learn the gravity of our sins, we cannot know the power of the sacrifice of Jesus.

From beginning to end, our Lenten comfort is in Him. He alone can tell us on Ash Wednesday not to lay up the treasures of our heart upon earth but to lay them up in heaven. He alone can tell us this because He makes the journey for us and with us.

For us. This is the knowledge of comfort that we begin with. "So God loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son to the end that all that believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." The first principle that we bring against the knowledge of our sinfulness is the everlasting love of God. Jesus has come in love for us. Nothing, not our sin, not even the sin of the whole world can obscure the love that God has for His people.

And with us. This is the deepening knowledge of comfort that we continue in. God's love has taken the true and ever-lasting identity of His people in the Incarnation of His Son. Oh, that we might let this truth settle at the center of our hearts! Jesus has lived truly as a man, and lives so still in the dimension of resurrection glory. But that He lived in our world in space and time, and carried the wholeness of His life into heaven, is now for us the greatest solace in our battle with sin and death.

The first Sunday in Lent we read in Matthew's Gospel of Jesus' temptation. It is the account of how the diabolical first assaulted Jesus, the human being, once His divine Sonship was acknowledged at His baptism. Through His human appetites and affections and the exercise of power, the devil sought to usurp the mission of His humanity. Instead, Jesus rebuked the perverseness of evil. And in the words of the author to the Hebrews, "He learned obedience by the things that He suffered."

The fact that Jesus was truly tempted then and "learned obedience" is great solace to us now. While He did not learn obedience from being disobedient, he was truly tested nonetheless. And he would be tested again to use His divine power for the sake of His humanity, when he was tempted to forsake His suffering and to come down from the cross. But He resisted to the point of death, just as He had done His whole life long, resisting temptation at each moment, and learning in Himself what it means to be a human being who freely obeys God.

Our comfort now is that Jesus understands our temptation. Again the author of Hebrews understood this profoundly. "For we have not an High Priest which cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

This is why Lent is so comfortable. It moves us toward our Lord, not as if He were far off, but where He is truly near, in our minds and hearts, beseeching us to draw close to Him. To be close to Him within where His kingdom really is, that is the sole purpose of Lent, and our liturgical wilderness. Rest and ease are there, where He speaks words of mercy, forgiveness, and love. To embrace the season of Lent is to know and feel the Savior embracing you.

**The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker**

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