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## SPRING-TRAINING

This Sunday is Septuagesima, the ninth before Easter and the third before Lent: and that's to say it is one of the most significant turning points in the Church's year. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany: these have set before us the wonder of the Lord's Incarnation, and the transformation of human nature that is revealed in him. The lessons for Septuagesima begin a new phase: for they remind us, with unremitting practicality, that this transformation does not take place without labour and struggle. The epistle speaks of the training of an athlete, a runner or a boxer; the gospel, of labour in the vineyard to bring in the harvest. In one way these lessons speak generally about the place of discipline in the Christian life generally: in another way they are designed very specifically to prepare us for Lent as a time of the Church's corporate discipline, as spring-training for spiritual life.

Septuagesima prepares us for Lent, and Lent is unquestionably a season of labour in the vineyard, of training for the spiritual contest, by means of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving (St. Matthew 6). What the Prayer Book asks of us in fact is rather modest. Just two days, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, are to be observed by fasting, that is, by abstaining from all food until evening, when a plain and modest meal is eaten. Otherwise it asks of us only a measure of abstinence (reduction in the quality of one's diet). Traditionally this means abstinence from flesh-meat, but more largely, as the 16th century Homily on Fasting puts it, "from all delicious pleasures and delectations worldly". Fasting precludes festivity, and so Lent is not the time for weddings to be solemnized (except for urgent cause, and then only in the simplest way). Abstinence also means that we take a hard look at the amount of time we spend watching television, surfing the net, playing computer games, shopping, cocktail parties, and so on. We invest a great deal of time and energy in secondary things, or even trivial time-wasting things, yet grudge a half hour spent reading Scripture or taking part in the Church's daily prayer.

That is the outward fast of Lent. As the Scripture repeatedly makes clear, however, such fasting is only of benefit if it is accompanied by the inward fast of the heart and mind from all that God hates (see Isaiah 58 on the futility and hypocrisy of fasting outwardly only). This inward fast consists in a turning away from the pride in which we have abused the good creatures he has given for our use and enjoyment - and a turning toward the Lord in humble trust in his mercy. This

conversion of the soul, this repentance in heart and mind, is the point of the Lenten exercise, and so it is properly completed in good works of service and witness done toward our neighbour, out of gratitude for the gifts of mercy given by God to us. Our Lenten works are "fruits worthy of repentance" (St. Luke 3), brought forth in gratitude for, and in virtue of, grace freely bestowed. Good works and their reward are both alike of God's free grace and not of our merit.

We practice self-denial, we curb the tyranny of the bodily appetites, that we may give ourselves more fully to God and neighbour. We fast from earthly bread that we may feast upon the bread of heaven, which is the word of God. "Welcome, dear feast of Lent." (Geo. Herbert)

**The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar**

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