

## **Lent Gives Us a Chance to Focus on What Matters Most**

I first read the Lord of the Rings trilogy when I was in junior high, and what I've always been struck by in them (along with The Hobbit) is the theme of growth; of having to leave a "safe space" and the familiar and go through adversity to lead to something greater. In Frodo Baggins case, he had to leave the comfort of the shire, face anxiety and fear, and endure so much but because of it, the world (and Frodo) were forever changed.

In our lives though it can be very easy to cling to the familiar. To drift from day to day. As humans, we sometimes can get focused on the here and now only, so our lives can easily revolve around our schedule or be very short-term as we put our priorities into being a busy-body or materialism. But the stark reality is for all that we put our energy into, it lasts but a moment, and there is no getting around the reality that we indeed return to ashes one day. The evil forces would come to the Shire if they were not faced; and evil will take over our souls if we too do not face it.

Lent gives us a chance to do just that, as we start this week with Ash Wednesday.

The joy though for the Christian is that is not the end of the story. The ashes symbolize something that once was; we though always will be. But while our earthly bodies turn to dust, our bodies are also glorified through the resurrection. However, the invitation to follow Jesus does require a response too. Jesus always gives us an invitation, and does not force Himself upon us. Like Gandalf the Gray coming to meet Bilbo and Frodo, Jesus comes to meet us and invites us to go on an adventure. But it's not easy to become the person we want to become.

This wonderful season of Lent gives us the time to take some of those steps as we grow closer to Him. It shouldn't be a season of just thinking of "stuff to give up" and abstaining from meat on Friday, but a true season of growth. Fasting, prayer and almsgiving are seen as traditional practices in Lent.

With respect to fasting, consider fasting from things that can take up our time and distract us from God and one another. Sometimes there are things we enjoy that maybe aren't out of control, but we recognize perhaps we spend too much time on. It could be video games, going to the casino, going to the mall or movies, eating too much fatty foods/sweets, etc. If you do decide to give something up, how about being constructive with it? For instance, if one gives up going to the movies on Friday, maybe that money for the ticket could instead be given to the needy, or the time could be given to spend time with your family members. Ultimately the good that comes from fasting from something allows us to look back after Lent ends and be in a better spot to use the virtue of temperance to keep our appetites under control.

Other times there are "spiritual fats" that we consume that would be best removed entirely, such as sins we have fallen into or bad habits such as gossiping, being condescending or impatient, or other sins. Again we want to emerge from Lent not to

find where we hid the candy, but rather a better person - so what better way to do that than work hard at trying to eliminate nagging sins from our lives.

Another spiritual practice during Lent is almsgiving. Lent gives us a chance to look at how we use our resources, but again think outside the box here. It's important to be generous and to help others, but time is perhaps an even more valuable commodity. Lent is a great time to try to become more generous and spend more time helping those in need, or even with family if we have become too busy or our out and about all the time rather than spending time at home with loved ones. Perhaps use Lent to re-discover the family meal and real conversation - not texting and status updates.

Lastly, Lent is a great time for prayer and spiritual growth. As a priest, I made a promise to pray daily a prayer called the Liturgy of the Hours. You can download an app for that prayer for free on your iPhone too. There's some good apps out there like Hallow and, as I mentioned in the homily a few weeks ago, Amen. Online, check out "Formed," ([formed.org](http://formed.org)) that our parish subscribes to. Here you'll find tons of videos for adults and children, including animated shorts for kids, that are great tools for catechesis or learning the faith. All you need do is enter in your parish name when prompted and zip code. Why not use Lent to watch a video a night? Or you can also go to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' site, [usccb.org](http://usccb.org)., and watch a daily meditation video on the readings of the day while prayerfully reading them yourself.

I hope you have a wonderful and joyful Lenten Season. Remember, this isn't a season to just get the ashes so people at the office know you went to Mass, or to "one up" people in conversations so they know what you've given up, or to just load up on fish on Fridays at fish fries. It's a season to grow as a person. Who do you want to become? Our end is not ashes. Our end is redemption through what Jesus has done for us. But if God is willing to go so far for us as to suffer and die out of love, how far are we willing to go for Him? Yes, it's time to leave the Shire. Taking up our crosses daily isn't fun, for the way to Easter for us all must lead through Good Friday. But ultimately we must do so to fix our eyes on the crown that never withers and fades, the crown of glory. The journey is at times long but we are never on that road alone - Jesus is with us every step of the way. Let's use this sacred season to look to Him and to see what we need to do to stay on that road that will lead us to His Kingdom.

Have a very blessed Lent!

Fr. Paul