

Column

Every family has certain festivals that it keeps. I am thinking of such things as birthdays, wedding anniversaries and annual civic days. The same is true with the Family of Faith. Very early on in the life of the Church, the followers of Jesus began to sanctify time: that is, they began to arrange their worship in such a way that the main events of Jesus' life and the pinnacle points of his teachings would be revisited each year. The outcome, which took a number of centuries to evolve, is the Church Year.

The custom of sanctifying time is not of the essence of Christianity. What I mean by "essence" is that observing special days and seasons is not something that is necessary to a person's eternal salvation. Nothing in the Church can be taught in that sense which is not directly commanded in Holy Scripture. Even so, a yearly scheme of presenting the great story of our redemption is very helpful. There is no better way of teaching the whole faith.

There are, in fact, eight great seasons which help to teach the faith in its entirety. They are:

--Advent, in which our Lord's coming – both past and future – is highlighted;

--Christmas which celebrates our Lord's birth and the incarnation (God becoming man in Jesus);

--Epiphany, a season of light marking the glory of Christ shining into all the world;

--Lent, a 40-day period of preparation for Easter;

--Easter, the Queen of Feasts in the Christian Church, which celebrates the bodily resurrection of Jesus;

--Ascension, the day of Jesus' enthronement and kingship; He goes into a cloud (a visible manifestation of the presence of the Almighty) and takes His throne in heaven;

--Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit; and

--Trinity, the summing up of God's self-revelation to man – one God in three Divine Persons.

We are now fast approaching the fourth season – Lent. It begins on Ash Wednesday and continues right up to Easter. In this season the faithful are called to do ‘spring cleaning’. Practices which are keeping us from being God’s best and our best are to be cast away.

During this season, many choose to “give up” something. This discipline is not taken on to gain favour or merit with God, but in order to bring the flesh into subjection to the spirit.

To tease out this last statement, our bodily appetites are prone to get out of hand. For example, instead of eating to live, we live to eat. The season of Lent is a corrective to this destructive tendency.

Lent is not just a time for giving up but also for taking on. Examples of things which we might want to look at taking on include: reading a portion of the Bible every day (if we are not already doing so), attending special weekday services at church, visiting one or more shut-in each week or taking on some new form of community service.

In 2 Peter 3:18, God’s people are admonished to: “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” May this be the goal and focus of all that we say, think and do during this season.

O LORD, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights; Give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness, and true holiness, to thy honour and glory, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

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