

5/6 March 2011
Ninth Sunday of the Year

Our Lenten Journey

My brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ,

The season of Lent begins this Wednesday. It is important that we prepare for it now.

Lent, of course, is a season in which we are called to a renewal of faith. We go back to the foundations of our faith, ensuring that our house is built on rock and not on sand, as today's Gospel passage reminds us.

The rock, of course, is Christ, he who 'leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection' (Heb 12.2). All we do during Lent is aimed at bringing us closer to him.

During Lent we are to learn again all that separates us from Christ. We repent of our sins. We celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Confession is a major task for Lent. By taking on a regular act of self-denial during Lent we train ourselves to turn again to Christ. We also come closer to the Lord by an increased practice of prayer, and by an additional generosity towards the poor. So, repentance, self-denial, almsgiving and prayer are the recipe for Lent.

This pattern of Lenten living prepares us to celebrate afresh the great events of our faith: the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Lord. This we do in the great ceremonies of Holy Week. I ask you now to look at how best you can take part in them.

In these ceremonies, Good Friday holds a special place. Every Friday during Lent holds a special place, for these Fridays link us to the Lord's death on the Cross. So I ask you to ensure that you mark each Friday in Lent with an act of self-denial. The ancient tradition of the Church is that we do not eat meat on these Fridays. Let us take up again the practice of abstaining from meat, or another favourite part of our diet, on the Fridays of Lent.

Prayer, too, is crucial. The Stations of the Cross are a form of prayer well suited to our Lenten journey. Please do try to follow the Stations of the Cross in your church during these coming weeks. By meditating together on the suffering and death of the Lord, undergone for our sake, we come closer to him and renew our love for him.

So far I have spoken of our Friday abstinence and our prayer as our pathway of preparation for Easter. Now I ask you to add to it a pattern of reflection on your own personal faith.

This you can do by joining in one of the many parish groups which follow the booklet 'Faithful Pilgrim' offered for this season of Lent. This year the themes of the booklet lead each group in a reflection on the message of Pope Benedict to us all during his recent Apostolic Visit. Coming together with a group of others is a marvellous way of deepening faith and encouraging each other.

There is also a more individual approach to such reflection and prayer. Every parish has been offered the small 'Walk with Me' booklets which open up a journey of personal prayer for the weeks of Lent. This, too, focuses on the words of Pope Benedict, concentrating on the wonderful teaching he gave during his homily in Westminster Cathedral. You may well find this helpful and encouraging, too.

These booklets are readily available. Do make use of them.

So this is our journey for Lent: a journey marked by self-denial, especially on each Friday. This prepares us to admit and confess our sins.

It is a journey marked by prayer, in the Stations of the Cross or before the Blessed Sacrament. This helps us to come to the Lord in love and appreciate more deeply his saving love for us.

Then, do mark your journey of Lent by prayerful reflection on the faith, either in a parish group or individually.

Please take steps today to make the most of these opportunities.

I am fully aware of the pressure on time which we all feel as I make these requests. It is difficult to fit more into a busy routine. Yet Lent itself helps us to address this issue. Paradoxically, if we can slow down during these weeks of Lent, making space for things which matter very much indeed, then we will find a greater peace and poise in our lives. Creating moments and times of space for prayer and reflection gives us new vitality and focus with which to return to our routine obligations. Try it and see!

During the Visit of Pope Benedict last September we felt again a certain pride in being Catholics. We rediscovered our identity as members of a great family. He reminded us that our Catholic way of life should have a distinctiveness about it, one that emerges from our relationship with the Lord. During these coming weeks let us renew that relationship by steadfastly observing our Lenten practices and encouraging each other to do so.

May God bless us all during this precious season of Lent.

Yours devotedly

✠Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster