



## THE BISHOP OF LEEDS

### Pastoral Letter Lent 2009

My dear brother and sisters in the Lord,

The effect of the credit crunch in which we find ourselves has made us aware that we cannot go on living in the same way that we have in the past. The ongoing financial crisis is a major item of news each day and what a sobering item of news it is for very many, especially those among us who are affected by unemployment and financial anxiety. Overnight the great god, Mammon, disappeared – it was no more real than the paper on which it was printed!

What is clear now is that each of us, as a result, is having to pull in our belts and assess what is essential and necessary for health and well-being and what is not. It makes us aware of how fragile the human construction of our life can be. It raises questions as to what it is in which we can put our trust and in what we cannot.

Lent, which begins on Wednesday, is a season that provides us with the opportunity to reflect on the things that, as Christians, should be more important in our lives. What is the solid ground that will stand us in good stead and what are the paths that lead us away from that? In other words, what are the principles that should guide the way we live; what are the values that can bring about goodness and holiness in our lives and, as a consequence, in those of others; and what are the things that separate us from those paths of greatness - for greatness is the path on which the Christian disciple is called to walk.

The Church has always been very clear and consistent about the tools to be used during Lent that best help us to return to those things. Indeed they were given to the Church by Jesus himself. They are prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

When I was a little boy, I was taught by my father that prayer was good for the soul; fasting was good for the body; and almsgiving was good for everyone else!

Pope Benedict has asked us to look again at the role of fasting in the life of Christians. So allow me to reflect with you upon the place of fasting and mortification in all our lives. Fasting, of course, is not the same as dieting. That is something we do to improve the shape of the body or for greater physical health. No, fasting has a different purpose altogether.

I met someone a little while ago who had been imprisoned and tortured and who was regularly denied food and water for days at a time. The strange thing, he confessed to me, was that this denial of food and water had led him to become more 'aware.' 'Aware of what?' I asked. 'Aware of what is real and important', he replied, 'and how life is more than what is placed before us'.

There are a lot of things in modern living to which people become addicted and without which they cannot imagine how they would cope. Obvious examples are drugs and alcohol, tobacco, constant nibbling, and even the endless need to have the noise of radio or television in the background. I am sure you can easily add to the list. Some of these things, of course, in their right place, are good. Perhaps! But the element of escapism that lies at the heart of many of them gives us an insight into how we can be seduced and led away from what is real.

In the Sacred Scriptures and the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, we find that fasting was part of the lives of those who were serious about God and about their responsibility towards the needs of others. This teaching they had received directly from Jesus.

Fasting is not a matter of punishment or mortification for the sake of it. It is a discipline that reminds us that we are sacrificing something out of love for God who is the greater good. Why? Because during Lent we want to see God more clearly. We do not want to obscure His presence in our lives by filling them constantly with other pleasures. It is also a way of curbing our own appetites that can sometimes get out of hand and lead us to sin. We only need think of gluttony and lust as examples. It also reminds us not to be glib about the plight of so many throughout the world for whom every day of the year is a very strict Lent. Fasting helps us to stand closer to God with greater commitment and also to those who suffer in our world and whom we should never ignore. As Saint Paul reminded us last week at Mass, *whatever you eat, whatever you drink, whatever you do at all, do it for the glory of God.*

Our Lord also taught us that there are some things in our lives which not only need prayer, but prayer combined with fasting. It may be that some of us have become so used to sin in our lives that we have become blind to it; or have become increasingly more self-centred that we are unaware of the needs of others. Fasting is an aid to save us from both.

I know how generous you all are in responding to disasters and to so many charitable causes and I bless God for it. But this Lent, let us not only give from what we have, despite our own financial restraints, but also from what we deny ourselves. Let us take fasting seriously – not just the Family Fast Day next Friday, as important as that is, but every day of Lent. Let us not grow mean by growing fat in body or in mind or in spirit.

I shall pray for you as I hope you shall for me that together we may tread the ways of the Lord this Lent and give great glory to God by this important witness to our faith and to the well-being of our Christian lives. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us today, let us be courageous in allowing the Lord to make *new roads in the wilderness and new paths in the wilds*.

Devotedly with my blessing,



+Arthur Roche  
Bishop of Leeds