

**First Sunday of Lent 2019**  
**Fr Jonathan Jong**

Luke 4.1-13

What should I give up for Lent? — Words from the whole people of God, this time every year.

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Perhaps even more than his like-minded predecessors, Caesarius—the 6th century bishop and theologian—was emphatic on this point: Christians were not to engage in sexual intercourse during Lent.<sup>1</sup> And as we can see from early medieval handbooks for confessors that proliferated throughout Christendom from the 7th through to the 9th century, this injunction spread far and wide. We find in here that sex with one's spouse is forbidden not only during Lent, but also during Easter week, Whistun week, Advent, any feast day—which includes every Sunday—and also any Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday.<sup>2</sup> Sex with anyone besides one's spouse is, of course, out of the question altogether. It is hard to say how strictly these rules were followed, but there is at least some (admittedly patchy and

equivocal) evidence, even up to the 20th century, that fewer babies are conceived—especially in Eastern Orthodox countries—in Lent, and not only because fewer marriages are contracted during this penitential season.<sup>3</sup>

The idea that married couples should give up sex for Lent may strike us as exemplary of the Church's prurient prudishness. And fair enough: it certainly looks like it is cut from the same sackcloth as what we find on the topic throughout our theological history, from Justin Martyr to Jerome, Augustine to Aquinas, from John Paul II and *Issues in Human Sexuality*. It is tempting to blame St Paul for a lot of this, who after all extolled the virtues of singleness and celibacy: but he gets an unfairly bad rep on this count. St Paul only ever overtly recommends marital celibacy for devotion to prayer, and even then only with mutual consent. It seems the early church flipped this suggestion on its head, insisting that prayer *requires* celibacy: our patristic prig Jerome even reminds us that St Paul tells us to pray unceasingly.<sup>4</sup> The implication is clear.

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We are now—thanks be to God—beginning to rethink our attitudes towards sex, and few of us would want to take up this venerable practice of marital celibacy during Lent. But I suspect that our attitudes towards the Lenten fast are still formed by the same pernicious uneasiness with our bodies that undergirded our ancestors’ squeamishness.

The old-fashioned phrase associated with fasting and other acts of abstinence and Christian discipline is indicative of this: the mortification of the flesh, with the emphasis on *flesh*. During Lent, we deny ourselves the pleasures of the flesh, as if there is something wrong with pleasure. Or we abstain from things that we find difficult to do without, as if there is virtue in the difficulty itself. At best, we give up things that are bad for us when we over-indulge: chocolate and alcohol, social media and meat. This is no bad thing, for our cholesterol and cortisol levels to benefit from our spiritual disciplines, and not only our souls.

And yet, all of this seems to miss something crucial about Lent, which is its preparatory character. Lent is—from its earliest days—preparation for Easter; and by the 5th century, also preparation for baptism, as Easter baptisms became more popular. In other words,

Lent is preparation for our participation in the death and resurrection of Christ: we join him in the wilderness because we join him in the river. Which is to say that an emphasis on the mortification of the *flesh* does not go nearly far enough: the accent should be on the *mortification*: we are not called just to deny our bodies but our whole selves.

The death that is baptism is, as you have heard it said here before, a prelude to new life. Indeed, both baptism and fasting are for us—as they are for Jesus in Luke’s gospel—preparations for life, which for him—and therefore for us—is an encounter with the world characterised by self-giving love.

God knows, and so do we, that the impediments to love are many and various. Perhaps it has always been thus, but it sure feels now like we live in a world organised around competition for scarce resources, for security, for power and glory. We cannot love the poor, because wealth is too scarce to subsidise their needs. We cannot love foreigners, because their military and economic might puts our prosperity at risk. We cannot love anyone but ourselves for fear that if we don’t love ourselves, we will discover that nobody else does either.

And yet, Jesus rejects the bread; rejects the guarantee of safety; rejects the offer of political authority, and in so doing refuses to feed our anxious desires. Jesus, stripped of the things we think we need, shows us God, who turns out to be our only actual need, and therefore the only worthy object of worship: this God, who is love, which is not to be tested, but received. Received, and therefore also given, which our lectionary conceals by ending our gospel reading one verse too early: from the wilderness, Jesus heads to Galilee to announce good news to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed.

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In its introduction to Lent on the Church of England website, it says that Lent involves “self-examination, penitence, self-denial, study, and preparation for Easter, to which almsgiving has traditionally been added”. Whatever its historical merits, this is theologically wrong. Almsgiving is not “added” to our Lenten observances, but is a part of what it means to fast and pray. As in baptism we die in order to live anew, so in Lent we deny ourselves in order to give of ourselves. Christian self-denial is never an end in

itself, but an act of love: for Christians *giving up* should always serve *giving*.

The poor Church Fathers, whom I earlier maligned, they knew this too, insisting over and over again—especially in their Lenten homilies—that fasting without almsgiving is no good.<sup>5</sup> Our good friend Caesarius is as insistent on this as he is about Lenten celibacy. It is even a common refrain in the early church, that we should calculate what we have denied ourselves in fasting, to give as much to the poor.<sup>6</sup> Still a good idea, I think. Just in case you were wondering, I don't know what kind of almsgiving is meant to follow from giving up sex.

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So, “What should I give up for Lent?”, is not quite the wrong question, but it is an incomplete one. We are to ask how our Lenten observances strengthen our service of others, lead us to love our neighbours better, the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. And if they don't, it's not too late to get a little bit more creative than chocolate and alcohol, social media and meat.

<sup>1</sup> Sermon 44

<sup>2</sup> Brundage, J. A. (1990). *Law, sex, and Christian society in medieval Europe*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>3</sup> Burguière, A. (1987). Demography. In J. Le Goff & P. Nora (eds.), *Constructing the past: essays in historical methodology* (pp. 99-122). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; Herteliu, C., Richmond, P., & Roehner, B. M. (2018). The influence of Lent on marriages and conceptions explored through a new methodology. *arXiv preprint arXiv:1804.02572*; Poska, A. M. (1998). *Regulating the people. The Catholic reformation in Seventeenth-century Spain*. Leiden, NL: Brill

<sup>4</sup> Against Jovinianus (Book I)

<sup>5</sup> e.g., Caesarius Sermon 1999; Augustine Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons 207; John Chrysostom Homilies on 1 Corinthians, 25.

<sup>6</sup> e.g., Apostolic Constitutions, Book V.20; Shepherd of Hermas, Similitude III.5; Augustine Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons 205; Leo the Great Sermon 49 (On Lent, 10).