

Preparing for Joy

BY NORMAN WIRZBA

Lent is an invitation to honesty and clarity. It can be our preparation for joy because it is the concentrated and disciplined time when we together work to root out the blindness and deception that prevent us from receiving each other as gracious gifts from God.

In Orthodox theological traditions, Christians are invited into the season of Lent as a time to prepare for joy. Lenten worship instructs us to begin with rejoicing:

Let us begin the Fast with joy.

Let us give ourselves to spiritual efforts.

Let us cleanse our souls.

Let us cleanse our flesh.

Let us fast from passions as we fast from foods,
taking pleasure in the good works of the Spirit

and accomplishing them in love

that we all may be made worthy to see the passion of Christ our God
and His Holy Pascha,

rejoicing with spiritual joy.¹

This emphasis on joy may surprise us, and perhaps even strike some of us as perverse, because we are accustomed to think of Lenten observance as a time of deprivation, a time when we give up or say “No” to a host of things and activities we otherwise love. How can we be expected to rejoice in the giving up of things that give us joy?

To answer this question we have to move deep into the heart of Christian faith and life. We have to get clear about our most basic commitments and attachments and then determine if they have their impulse in a clean heart. The time of Lent is not about saying “No” to anything made or

provided by God. It cannot be, because everything God has made is good and beautiful, a gift and blessing that God has provided as the expression of his love. If there is a “No” that has to be said, it will be a “No” directed to the distorting and degrading ways we have developed in appropriating these gifts. The problem is not with the things of this world. The problem is with us because we so readily misperceive and misuse what God has given us. We

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do not appreciate how in mishandling the gifts of God we bring ruin to ourselves and to the world *while we are in the midst of having a good time.*

Lent is such an important part of Christian rhythms because we need regular and sustained time to assess and address the ways in which human desires become distorted and off-track – what Orthodox writers call the “passions.” If we can think of

our entrance into the Christian life as putting on a new set of glasses so that everything we see now comes to us from Christ’s point of view – Paul speaks this way when he says that to be “in Christ” means that we see everything and everyone from his point of view rather than our own (2 Corinthians 5:16 ff.) – what often happens is that our glasses lose focus. They become dirty or scratched and we gradually lose the ability to see things as the gifts of God that they really are. Instead we see them in terms of what they can do for us. Our glasses, rather than helping us see everything in their relation to God, promote a vision of the world geared to self-enhancement and self-glorification.

The distorting and ultimately degrading vision I have just described happens easily. Simply by living in a consumerist culture like our own we are daily taught to see everything as a means to the satisfaction of whatever end we choose. We are not, for the most part, mean-spirited about this. We are simply performing a script that is written out for us in thousands of media and marketing messages. It is a message that tells us we are the center of the world, and that we should expect to enjoy things on demand, immediately, conveniently, and at an affordable price. This picture of life as a quest for personal enjoyment and entertainment is difficult to assess and correct because the very glasses we are using to look at our situation are already out of proper focus. Put theologically, we are oblivious to much of our sin because the faculties we need to assess it are themselves infected.

This is why the season of Lent begins with repentance. In his wonderful short book *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha*, Alexander Schmemmann says Lent “is a school of repentance to which every Christian must go every year in order to deepen his faith, to re-evaluate, and, if possible, to change his life.”² Christians need this school so that we can begin to appreciate how much our vision and handling of the world is a distortion and degradation. Repentance is the time when we learn to see each other rightly as gifts of God’s love. Schmemmann continues: “repentance, above everything else, is a return to the genuine order of things, the restoration of the right vision.”³ Seeing rightly is no small thing. It involves the difficult labor of rejecting impulses, whether self or culturally produced, to turn everything we meet into a means of self-satisfaction.

During Lent it is common for the gospel story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) to be read. In it we are reminded of how much we are like the young son who enjoys a life and a home of provision and care but instead chooses to go into exile. Looked at from the outside, his decision astounds us because it is clear that he is choosing a path of quick pleasure but long-term ruin and misery. We wonder about why he does it, why he chooses exile over home, but then fail to see that *we make the same decision ourselves all the time*. Though we may not find ourselves eating and living like pigs, we nonetheless willingly participate in practices that too often bring about the suffering or ruin of ourselves and whatever we touch: in the pursuit of professional success we neglect or abandon family members, communities, and neighborhoods; for the sake of cheap food and convenient eating we degrade our lands and waters and consign farm animals and farm workers to misery; and, with the hope of a good retirement plan we give our proxies to companies that uproot communities, destroy land, and mistreat workers. Of course, we do not wake up in the morning asking how we can neglect our children or abuse the world! But the effect of so many of our choices and practices – all of them expected and deemed by our culture to be normal – put us precisely where as Christians we should not be.

To repent we need to be confronted with the blindness and the foolishness of our ways. The confrontation can be painful because few of us like to come face to face with the arrogance, anxiety, and pettiness that animate our hearts. Deep down we are more fearful than we know and less trusting in God’s love than we care to admit. Will God really take care of us? Does God really love us? Wouldn’t it be wiser if we took life into our own hands? Fuelled with these kinds of questions, we make the decision that it is better for us to stick with the life we know, the “old life” with all its injustices and pains, rather than risk the “new life” that Christ reveals on Easter morning, the resurrection life that is victorious over suffering and death. If we stay with these despairing questions long enough, we eventually come to think that life *cannot* change. Sloth (acedia) and pride – sins of the spirit – now have the opportunity to take over.

It is part of the wisdom of liturgical traditions to stress that these are not matters that we can simply think our way through alone. We need corporate, embodied practices like fasting that are worked on together as a community if we hope to deal with the self- and world-damaging sin that animates our desire. To fast properly, however, we need to understand that Christian asceticism is often falsely characterized as a simple rejection, even

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punishing, of the body. We might think of “extreme” monks who perform acts of denial and deprivation that either leave us astounded or sick. Schmemmann makes a crucial, correcting point when he says, “Christian asceticism is a fight, not *against* but *for* the body.”⁴

It is a great error to ever be against any material body, our own or anyone else’s, because every body is a gift and a physical manifestation of God’s love. This

means that when Christians fast they are not despising their bodies or declaring food as an enemy. Rather than being a rejection of food, fasting is the rejection of all forms of eating that train us to relate to food (and to others) in an improper way. What is improper eating? It is eating that is presumptive and that assumes food is ours for the taking. It is eating that has regard primarily for the pleasures of one’s own belly but not for the bellies of others. It is eating that dishonors God because it degrades the sources of food – land, water, plants, animals – and abuses the means – farm workers, cooks, waiters, clean-up crews – that put food on our tables. It is eating that forgets food is a blessing to be shared.

Among early Christian writers it was significant that the first sin in the Garden of Eden was an eating sin. Eating is central because it is utterly fundamental to all of creaturely life. It is also one of our most intimate and embodied acts, the daily means through which we relate to the created world, communities of humanity, and ultimately to God. Eating is thus a paradigmatic act that expresses – often with far greater honesty than the verbal piety we offer – who we think we are and how we fit into the world. It bears witness to a system of values that ranks and prioritizes all others in relation to ourselves. Adam and Eve sinned by turning an action that unites us to the Creator and the whole creation into an exercise that was self-serving. Rather than receiving food as a gift from God and as a means of communion with divine love, Adam and Eve ate apart from and in forgetfulness

of God. They made food into an idol, an entity that would reflect and serve their interests. Their thinking about food was thus drastically reduced or shortened to the narrow register of their own concern. They moved from being humble to being arrogant creatures.

Like fasting, humility is much misunderstood. To see what it is about, we should look more carefully at Genesis 2-3 because it is there that we find a profound story about who we truly are and what we are supposed to do. God is revealed here as the first Gardener who takes the soil of the ground (*adamah*) and, by holding it close and breathing into it, makes it come alive in the diverse forms of human (*adam*), plant, and animal life. This is a picture of profound intimacy and interdependence. All terrestrial life circulates through soil, which is itself saturated with the warm and fertile breath of God. No creaturely thing exists in isolation or through itself or its own means. All that exists reflects the attentive, patient, and care-full action of God who forever stays near to work and water and protect. Astoundingly, God the Gardener then invites the first human to join in the care and preservation of the Garden of Delight (which is what Eden really means). We need to see that the gardening work to which humanity is called is not a punishment. It is, instead, an invitation to know deeply and in a detailed way the intricacy and the vulnerability of creaturely life together. Tending and keeping each other is the expression of a commitment to see the world whole and in terms of its interdependence.

Arrogance is the denial of interdependence. It is a dishonest assertion of ourselves as able to stand alone, no longer in need of others or God, and determined to appropriate the world as we want. From God's point of view, arrogance is a form of blindness and stupidity. It is the refusal to see our need for what it is, namely a blessing that draws us closer to each other and to God. In a profound observation, Anthony Bloom, the leader of the British Russian Orthodox Church, has noted:

This assertion of self is a sign of insecurity and lack of fulfillment. Also a measure of our lack of love, because love is forgetful of self and affirms the loved ones. It reveals an uncertainty with regard to the vigor of our being and our inability to trust other people's love. We assert ourselves to be sure that our existence is recognized and that our own being is not endangered, and by doing so we become small and void of content.⁵

Arrogance is such a destructive sin because it causes us to think we could live alone and primarily for ourselves. It is a posture shown to be a lie every time we eat.

Our brief reflection helps us see that humility is not an exercise in self-loathing. It is rather the honest admission of personal life as necessarily enfolded within and dependent on the lives of others and the gifts of God. Humility equips us to see creation in its interdependent wholeness.

Schmemmann says, "*Humility* alone is capable of truth, of seeing and accepting things as they are and therefore of seeing God's majesty and goodness and love in everything."⁶ We are not to despise ourselves or each other because the humble person appreciates how every creature is loved and nurtured by God. Humility makes possible the true enjoyment of others because we now perceive and receive them properly: namely, as gifts and blessings meant to be cared for, celebrated, and shared. Without humility, in other words, it is impossible to love another.

Lent is our collective movement into genuine life *together*, which is why *communion* is such an important term during this season. What makes Lent difficult for us is that we would like to think we can enjoy communion without offering ourselves to each other. It would be so much easier if we could experience real togetherness simply by relating to others always on *our* terms. But this cannot work. Bloom says, "We must act ruthlessly against this tendency we have to judge everything from the viewpoint of our little self."⁷ Communion is built upon love, and love is always an hospitable act that welcomes, nurtures, and sets others free to be themselves. To love another is to give oneself and one's abilities and gifts to them. Only then can our presence in the world be a source of joy to those we meet.

At the heart of Lenten observance there is a paradoxical movement: to genuinely live we must first die. Christ's way to resurrection was through the cross. As followers of Christ we should not expect that we can experience newness of life if we have not first been cleansed of all the old, sinful habits and dispositions that confine others to the narrow, self-serving scope of our own fears and arrogance, the very fears and arrogance that put Jesus on the cross. Lent, says Bloom, is a movement to the joy of resurrection life. "To rise again we must first die. Die to our hampering selfishness, die to our fears, die to everything which makes the world so narrow, so cold, so cruel."⁸

Lent can be our preparation for joy because it is the concentrated and disciplined time when we work together to root out the blindness and deception that prevent us from receiving each other as gracious gifts from God. It is a necessary time for Christians because without it we run the risk of experiencing what can only be termed a false joy, a 'joy' that has been rendered false by the anxiety, hubris, and destruction that make it possible. True joy is freedom from fear and alienation. Real joy is knowing that we are loved and nurtured. Lenten practices like fasting prepare us for joy because they turn our self-serving into self-offering ways that nurture, celebrate, and share the gifts of God. They remove the glasses that distort our vision and degrade our relations with others.

Lent teaches us that far too often we live a counterfeit life. It shows us that we have settled for a poor and degraded version of the real thing, which is life in its vibrant freshness and abundance. In the face of a culture that encourages us to neglect, degrade, and abuse each other, Lent invites us to see ourselves and our world clearly, humbly, and truly. Moved beyond

the stifling scope of our worry, fear, and petty desires, we can finally be opened to receive the blessings of God. Though not himself a member of Orthodox theological traditions, few have understood this with as much clarity as Thomas Traherne, the seventeenth-century British poet, who wrote:

you never enjoy the world aright, till you so love the beauty of enjoying it, that you are covetous and earnest to persuade others to enjoy it. And so perfectly hate the abominable corruption of men in despising it, that you had rather suffer the flames of Hell than willingly be guilty of their error. There is so much blindness and ingratitude and damned folly in it. It is a Temple of Majesty, yet no man regards it. It is a region of Light and Peace, did not man disquiet it. It is the Paradise of God.⁹

Properly understood and practiced, Lent is an invitation to honesty and clarity. It is the disciplined time we need to learn to see each other and the world more deeply as the material manifestations of God's love. Cleansed of our sinful attachments, and finding God always to be near, we can then go out to welcome everyone and everything with joy.

NOTES

1 This passage—quoted in Thomas Hopko, *The Lenten Spring: Readings for Great Lent* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983), 12—is from the vespers liturgy for Forgiveness Sunday, which is the last Sunday before the season of Lent. "Pascha" is the name in the Orthodox tradition for Easter; it literally means "Passover."

2 Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1969), 9.

3 *Ibid.*, 20.

4 *Ibid.*, 38.

5 Anthony Bloom, *Meditations on a Theme* (New York: Continuum, 2003 [1971]), 6.

6 Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent*, 36.

7 Anthony Bloom, *Meditations on a Theme*, 53.

8 *Ibid.*, 119.

9 Thomas Traherne, *Centuries*, I, 31 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 15.



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