

Some think Lent is a time for fasting. But I think we can also see it as a time of feasting. I say this because of the story of the fig tree in our Gospel. Three years without bearing fruit. What could be the problem? The owner figures that the tree is simply a dud and wants to cut it down. The vinedresser, however, a little more in touch with nature, comes to a different conclusion. Maybe all that is needed to turn things around is a bit of fertilizer.

As we look at Christians in America, we have to be honest. A full 82% of us say we are Christians. So where's the fruit? We're certainly feeding ourselves often enough, with about 67% per cent of us overweight. Obviously what we're consuming is not quite the *right* nourishment to produce the desired results.

So Lent then is an appropriate time to examine our diet (both physical and spiritual) and make some **changes** so that we can bear fruit that **is** worthy of the gifts we've been given, as well as pleasing to the Lord. First, let's cut the junk food from the diet so we are not so bloated. It could be the chips, fries, burgers, and cokes that drain our pocketbooks and make us lethargic. Or it could be too many hours of TV, video games, and the web which fill our heads with so much noise that we can't sit still, quiet down and listen to God. Let's turn it all off for a while.

Yes, this is fasting. But the goal is to **save** our appetite so that we can **feast** on other things such as the Word of God. When's the last time you sat down and read an entire book of the bible, from start to finish? (If not all in one sitting, but over the course of a few days or weeks). Exodus makes for a good Lenten read, since our second reading from last Sunday tells us that Israel's odyssey was for our sake, to provide an example. When was the last time you identified a short, poignant Bible text and memorized it, repeating it daily, even several times a day, meditating on it, applying it to various aspects of your life?

How about the Eucharist, the greatest nourishment of all? Lent is a great time to go more often, even daily. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament outside of Mass is like stimulating the appetite before the meal (aperitif) or taking time to digest it afterwards (digestif). Either way, adoration helps us derive more benefit from our Eucharistic feast.

Then there is the time we devote to entertainment. Could we not redirect some of those hours of entertainment to those that actually nourish our spiritual lives? Mel Gibson's film on the Lord's passion was released on Ash Wednesday, 2004 for a reason. It is offered as a Lenten meditation to help us understand the shocking consequences of sin and the astounding Love of Christ who lays down his life for his friends. Get some folks together and watch this powerful film on DVD. If you're concerned that the violence of *The Passion of the Christ* would be too much for you or your family, rent Franco Zeffirili's "Jesus of Nazareth" and watch it with family and friends. If you prefer books, read the life of a saint or the provocative religious fiction of an author such as C.S. Lewis, or even more *ap pro peau* Pope Benedict's Jesus of Nazareth or one of his encyclicals such as *God is Love* or *In Hope We Are Saved*.

Finally, one of the most spiritually nourishing and energizing experiences of all is giving of ourselves. We call it almsgiving. It is in giving that we receive, says the Prayer of St. Francis. If we save money from fasting, let's give it away. There are the corporal works of mercy such as helping the poor and hungry. Helping our St. Lazarus Society would be a fantastic way to reach out to our less fortunate brothers and sisters and those struggling in our community. Then there are the spiritual works of mercy, such as feeding the spiritually hungry. We could make a commitment to pray for the sick listed in our bulletin, or heck even go and visit them. We could volunteer to teach our children who come here for religious education. We could offer to help the Altar Society prepare and serve a meal for those families who have funeral services here at St. Ann's. And if we're up for a challenge, why not volunteer to visit and bring to communion to our sick in the hospital or even those in prison. All of these ministries and many others need our loving support.

Prayer. Fasting. Almsgiving. Three inter-related fertilizers to help the barren and struggling fig tree bear fruit. But keep in mind the owner's directive:– fertilize it for a year, and if we see no results, fetch the axe. And that would be a shame, not only for the fig tree, but especially for us as stewards of God's gifts and blessings. So no more excuses. No more procrastinating. Let's vow to make this Lent and our stewardship bear the fruit our Lord so much desires.