

Lent Message from Bishop Brendan Leahy

Sunday 11 February 2024



This coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. It begins the Season of Lent, the great period of six weeks leading up to Easter when Christians throughout the world go on retreat, as it were, so as to love God and their neighbour more. There are three pillars associated with Lent – **Prayer**, **Almsgiving** and **Fasting**. Last year I suggested we focus on prayer. And while prayer will always be a key feature of Lent, this year I want to suggest that we focus on Almsgiving.

We know that Saint Ita, Patron of the Diocese of Limerick, was once asked by Saint Brendan, what were the three things which God most detests. She replied, **“A scowling face, obstinacy in wrong-doing, and too great a confidence in the power of money”**. Saint Brendan then asked her what three things God especially loved. She replied, **“True faith in God with a pure heart, a simple life with a religious spirit, and open-handed generous giving inspired by love”**. Saint Ita reminds us of the essentials. She knew how much God has given to us and how we, in our turn, are called and sent to give to others. She would have read Saint Paul’s letter in which he writes, “Though He was rich, yet for our sake God became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9), rich, that is, in the love of God and, in referring to how we are to give to others, Saint Paul writes that “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:6-7).



When we consider almsgiving in Lent, our mind might think immediately about giving in terms of **contributing to the poor or to good causes**. That is indeed good to do. But almsgiving is about much more than that. It has to do with our day-to-day attitude to life. Lent offers us a time to improve a little more in becoming people who throughout the day live with an attitude of cheerful giving.

While we might not have much finance to share, there are many more ways of giving. For instance, we can lend a **listening ear** to someone who wants to chat. We can **exercise patience** in situations that are testing us. We can give tremendously by **doing our work well** or **carrying out our duties well** as a mother or father, son or daughter, an employer or an employee. We can share our values by **giving witness** to them. We can **offer a smile** to welcome others. We can offer **words of consolation** or **good advice**.



We can give by trying to understand others better and to forgive others if they have offended us. Hospitality is a praiseworthy expression of giving, especially when we **welcome, protect, promote and integrate** those who are refugees and migrants, or those with religious convictions different to ours. Volunteering and giving support and encouragement to the social initiatives in our church or neighbourhood is a valuable way of giving. Of course prayer for other people's intentions and for peace in our world is a wonderful way of giving. And uniting our sufferings with Jesus' self-offering out of love on the Cross is a noble form of giving.

So, yes, there are indeed countless ways of giving. Let's see how we can try, with God's grace, to give more of ourselves in our relationship with God and in our relationships with others. And let us give thanks for all who have helped us and for those who, in big and small ways, work on our behalf.

One final point. There is a particular way that we can practise "giving" that is very much linked with Lent, namely, to give over our sins to God. There's a story that comes from Bethlehem. Saint Jerome, a holy man and great expert on Scripture, was one day praying and suddenly felt as if God was saying to him: "Jerome, you have done great things and given me many gifts, but there is one thing you haven't given me, and it would please me more than all the rest..." The saint thought and then dared to whisper, "Lord, I cannot think of anything. Tell me, what else can I offer you?" A short time of silence passed, and he could hear in his heart the voice of Christ saying: "Jerome, I want your sins. Give me your sins!" Jerome replied: "My sins? What will you do with my sins Lord?" and Jesus said: "I want your sins so that I can forgive them, that is why I came into the world". Yes, Jesus is a **Divine Doctor** who wants to heal us. We need to hand over, to give, our sins to Him.



Many will know the story of a young child in a Dublin school years ago in a recording for RTE recounting the story of John the Baptist in her own words. She came up with the great line that is often quoted since – John the Baptist told the people to

"GIVE UP YER AULD SINS!"

Let us pray for one another this Lent. I have put together a prayer card entitled "Love is...saying you're sorry" with various options to help you in examining your conscience. I've also written a Pastoral Letter that I will distribute in the coming weeks.

May this Lent be a time for us all to discover many new ways of giving in our lives.