

The fly on the wall in kitchens all over Australia last night would have seen people frying up the batter to make the time-honoured traditional pancakes in order for others to apply their own particular toppings. Syrup, sugar, lemon juice, jam, ice cream, chocolate, mango, and banana - and that was just on the first pancake! And then we wake to a day of austerity. For many of us, we've eaten our last bar of chocolate for a while. Sugar in our tea or coffee is already a distant, fond memory. And as for alcoholic beverage, when will we taste that sweet poison once more. Lent has arrived.

But why do we do it? Why do we deprive ourselves of the things we love? What possible reason is there for doing without a trusted friend, an ally, something which brings us comfort and pleasure. Ask most people and the standard answer they will give you is simply "because it's Lent".

Lent is a funny period of the year, not least because it's not really standardised throughout the world-wide church. There was a time in the early church when all baptisms were carried out by the bishop not a priest – priests weren't allowed to baptise. Furthermore, baptism was for adults only in a service which took place at Easter and it was preceded by a period of preparation. Additionally it became the custom for those who, for reason of grievous sin, had become excommunicated from the church, to prepare for readmission to communion at Easter. Lent was special for those people for whom a significant event would take place at the great festival – for the rest of the Church it was just the same as the rest of the year.

It became the custom, however, that many people would join in spending the time in preparation for Easter, particularly when the number of people to be baptised at that one particular time in the Church's year dropped due to the popularity of infants being baptized very soon after their birth. Consequently, the observance of Lent became associated with Christ's time of preparation in the wilderness; a period of forty days according to the Gospels. The period of Lent and whether it included Holy Week, Good Friday and the rest has changed over the centuries: nowadays the western church celebrates a Lent of more than forty days due to the fact that we do not demand that the Lenten observance of fasting is obligatory on a Sunday which is a joyous day on which feasting rather than fasting is more appropriate.

But is giving up things we like the only thing we can do?

Jesus didn't say much about giving things up, indeed, he and his disciples were criticized for *not* fasting when other disciples did! In our gospel reading today we hear him talking about receiving rewards for in heaven depending on man's *actions* on earth. This seems to strike at the very idea of justification by faith. St. Paul was firmly of the belief that it was not the actions that a man (or woman) carried out that determined whether or not he was destined for paradise, but what he actually believed. The good works followed the true belief, not vice-versa.

In the passage we have just heard, Jesus speaks of rewards on three occasions. These are not isolated sayings either; much of the sermon on the mount speaks of reward. Clearly, being good for the sake of being good is not at the heart of Jesus' message. To receive the reward requires the right kind of giving to the needy, the right kind of prayer, the right kind of fasting: but, nevertheless, there is still a real reward at the end of it.

What is important is what this reward is *not*.

It is clear from this passage that Jesus is not thinking of material reward, indeed, material reward is the exact opposite of the reward he was talking of in this passage. If you read the Old Testament, goodness *is* associated with material reward - many passages talk about a man's land being bountiful if he obeys the Lord. The reading from the prophecy of Joel which we've just heard reinforces this. In addition, we need also to realise that the highest rewards don't come to those

who are actively seeking them. This is because we do not judge in the same way that God judges. We judge in terms of law (by which standards, none of us are entitled to any reward). God, on the other hand has a different yardstick, because he judges according to love. So the great paradox for the Christian is that we hope for a reward but not through our own efforts. Indeed, our own efforts are so futile that it is only when we realise that we have failed to achieve a reward, that we have not lived up to the standards by which we could legally claim a reward; only when we recognise our failure do we succeed.

Having noted that the rewards of which Christ speaks are not material rewards we can sensibly conclude that they are, instead, spiritual rewards. The first such reward is a feeling of satisfaction at having obeyed the words and commands of Jesus Christ. This may entail, as Jesus predicted, losing all physical possessions, fortune, family and fame and even one's own life. However, we will recognize the inner satisfaction beyond price, of having done everything Christ requests. It was not for nothing that Justin Martyr requested that his followers did not try to rescue him from his martyrdom - the loss of his life was the supreme pinnacle to him.

And there is another reward, that of there being even more work to do. Another Christian paradox is that a task well done does not bring rest but yet more work. Think back to the parable of the talents - to those who had done best of all even more work was given them. If a teacher has a good student, he does not allow him to simply coast through his studies but pushes him to the extreme. It is said that if you want something done give it to a busy person - that is never more true than in the church.

Finally, the third Christian reward is that which has been called through the ages "the vision of God". If you take your own way you drift away from God. The worldly man has no thoughts of the spiritual life. But the man who seeks to walk with God finds his life growing closer to God.

So these rewards are there for those who try to follow the rule of Christ. These rewards, as we have suggested, come, not from a giving up of something, but of a doing extra with the right motives at heart. Jesus suggests that this is laying up treasures in heaven.

We can plough all our treasures into various savings accounts, stocks and shares, and what have you. We can similarly invest in items we know will not depreciate in value – land, for example. However, there is always the possibility that we will be wrong, that our wise investments will not be so wise. Similarly, physical possessions are always susceptible to being stolen. Now this is not to say that there is anything inherently wrong with these items, but it is wrong to set one's whole life by them. Much better to store up treasures which will not depreciate and are in no danger of being stolen. These are the treasures which Jesus alludes to, treasures built up by giving alms, prayer, fasting, speaking openly about Jesus, loving one another. *These* are the treasures which build up a huge rate of interest in the heavenly account. And they need to build up a huge interest on our meagre deposit because such a huge ransom has already been paid, at Calvary.

It is important to remember that nothing we can do is ever sufficient of that great sacrifice. The Jewish Hasidic tradition teaches that everyone should have two pockets in their coats with two slips of paper. One slip says: "I am only dust and ashes." The other "For me the whole universe was created." Sometimes we need to remember that first slip of paper, as we have done and will do tonight as we come to be marked with the ashes of repentance, and sometimes we also need to remember the second - to remember that we have been adopted by God in Christ - that through him God forgives us - and makes us joint heirs with Christ of all that has been made.