

Right Reverend Christopher Budd
Bishop of Plymouth



PASTORAL LETTER
SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
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My dear friends

I suggest we start this Lent by reflecting on how many Lents we have completed during the course of our lives, and whether we can honestly describe any of them as life-changing. This is an invitation to recognise the moments of grace that have already been a part of our lives and how we have responded to them. We have much to thank the Lord for.

The past will always have importance. The gifts of God have shaped it, even though our sinfulness has blemished it. Lent has come again, another opportunity of grace which the Lord's goodness gives us. We need to work out in advance how we intend to use it. As often these days, CAFOD kindly gives us a steer. Their summons this year is "Give it up". This at first sight may seem a little negative, but it is capable of a positive unpacking.

The first thing that must come to mind during Lent is the re-establishment of our proper priorities. The overriding priority of the Christian life is God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If that priority is alive and well, then our Christian life is healthy even though we have to deal with the fallout of our sinfulness. Lent is a good time to do this.

Most basic to the Christian life is prayer. This is not just something we do; it is – or should be - a way of life. We need to check whether this is the case or not. Do we need to undertake a thorough re-evaluation of the important things in our life and whether they have been swamped by the less important things? We may be bored a little by the Lenten insistence on prayer, but it is only asking us whether God is back at centre stage, or is he only allowed into the edges of our lives? Here there are some important issues for our Lenten reflection and discipline.

If we embark on Lent with God as our main focus, we can make a lot of sense of the invitation, "Give it up". It is none other than fasting and almsgiving, captured in the short, snappy phrase.

Let us think about "Give it up" for a few minutes. There may well be things in our lives that have taken hold of us in such a way that it has become difficult to see ourselves as people of faith, hope and love. The signs of our Christian living may have all but disappeared from view, from our own view and from other people's.

May I suggest some areas which we could subject to a Lenten scrutiny:

- **Food and Drink** – Are we becoming slaves of the advertisers, the supermarkets and our own likes and dislikes, so that we are losing control of this area of our lives? As we acquire items for ourselves do we spare a thought for those who have next to nothing? Perhaps introducing an element of fast into the next six weeks may help us to tackle the relevant issues in this area of our lives. 'Give it up' could make a lot of sense.
- **Sexuality** – Is our sexual and affective nature still a gift from God at the service of love, or is it a commodity that I can use whenever and wherever for my own gratification? The way we live our sexual being and use our God-given ability to be affectionate will always be a good indicator of whether we really do know how to love others in an appropriate fashion. "Give it up" in this context could well mean a rediscovery of more healthy sexual attitudes.
- **Our Relationships** – "Give it up" is shouted loud and clear at us from those many parts of the world where the tyrant, poverty, reigns supreme (we should not forget that this tyrant is also colonising parts of our own land). Poor people challenge us about this. Creation itself challenges us about this. The Spirit of God given in Baptism challenges us about this. We belong to each other; we have solidarity with each other because of our human dignity. Is our life dominated by a 'me first' philosophy, or by our fraternity with each other? The blessings and woes in today's Gospel should at least pull us up and encourage us to ask these or similar questions.

All this is more than enough for one Lent. If we take the three pillars of Lent – prayer, fasting and almsgiving - we could, under each one, give ourselves an agenda that involves both "giving up" and "replacing" with something more life-giving.

May I wish you all a most fruitful Lent.

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To be read at all Masses on the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time