



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Luke 4

First Sunday of Lent 28 February, 2004

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"Jesus fasted for forty days," Luke tells us, "eating nothing." "And," the evangelist writes with characteristic understatement, "When the forty days were over, Jesus was hungry."

I'll bet he was.

Saint Ambrose writes of this gospel passage: "take note of that mystical number of days. Remember: for forty days the flood waters of the deep were poured forth, and so, by sanctifying a fast of forty days, Christ brings before us the returning mercies of a calmer sky. So too, by a fast of forty days, Moses earned for himself the understanding of the law; and our fathers being for forty days in the wilderness, obtained the food of Angels." On Ash Wednesday, we entered the desert with Jesus, and because it is our highest calling to imitate Him, we too enter the fast, so that we may hunger with Him. But mere physical hunger is nothing in itself. We fast because it awakens us to a spiritual hunger. A deep and ceaseless hunger that has been with us all our lives. All of us were created for union with God, and until that union is made perfect in Heaven, we will hunger for it, like it or not.

The problem is that our senses are so clouded by sin, that we inevitably find ourselves drawn to things that aren't God. "What sort of Father would give his son a stone when he asks for bread?" Christ says to us; yet there we sit, filling our bellies with gravel when the very bread of life awaits us at the altar of God. And the devil is always on hand with a fresh pile of stones. "Go ahead!" he cries, "Eat up! Watch another reality show. Have another bowl of ice cream. Turn up the radio and have a second glass of wine. Find yourself a faster car and a fancier house." We eat and eat and eat, and the more we eat, the emptier we feel.

Alas, the hunger sticks with us. Try as we might to avoid it, each of us must face that hunger--must take up that cross every day. But there is a joyful paradox at the heart of all this: those of us who find the courage to face that hunger--who humble ourselves to beg Christ for the strength to bear that cross--these people find, often even to their own surprise, that they are unexpectedly and inexplicably at peace.

Have you ever wondered why Mother Teresa kept insisting that "the poor are



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great people?" It's because physical hunger, material poverty, bodily need--these things have a way of awakening us to our spiritual need. And this is why, especially during these forty days of Lent, we confess our sins, and we fast. We turn off the television for a bit. Lay off on the ice cream. Jettison some of those material possessions that weigh down our souls. Sit in a quiet room and settle into a routine that is a little more focused on joy and a little less focused on fun. There will be plenty of fun when Easter comes. For now, it is our duty to fast a little. To abstain from some of the daily distractions that have begun to cloud our vision, so that, awakened by our fasting, and strengthened by the sacrament of confession, we can identify that spiritual hunger which draws us to this altar where the only really satisfying food awaits us.