

It seems like only yesterday we were sitting down to turkey and Christmas pudding, and now here we are in Lent!

But is it going to be the old routine of giving up chocolate and alcohol for a few weeks, and then back to normal until this time next year?

So what is the Lord actually calling us to be through the Season of Lent?

And I do mean 'be:' because we can do things, and give things up without changing one iota what we are in our deepest self.

I believe the answer to what the Lord wants us to become through Lent is to be found in Scripture, and the teaching of the Church.

If we put those two elements together, individually and collectively as the Church, then Lent will come alive in us.

Firstly, let's look at what Scripture has to say to us.

In the Gospel Luke says that Jesus: "Filled with the Holy Spirit was led by the Spirit through the wilderness." Lk. 4: 1 & 2

We can do nothing, and will only be empty vessels, unless we seek to be filled with the Spirit of Christ. To ask him to fill us day by day.

And, when that happens, we won't be whisked away out of the grim reality of the world we inhabit.

Because the Gospel says Jesus was led through the wilderness by the Spirit.

For Luke, the wilderness is a metaphor - a picture - of what the world is like since the Temptation and Fall of humanity in the person of Adam and Eve in the Garden.

It's a barren and hostile place where the Devil, and all his works will be encountered.

But, if we're to faithfully follow Jesus, we must not retreat from the world into our own little religious bubble.

After all, Jesus didn't, did He?

He went into the wilderness to confront the Devil: to face him down with the armoury of Scripture - the Word of God.

And: "Having exhausted all the ways of tempting him, the devil left to return at the appointed time." Lk. 4: 13

The appointed time being the Crucifixion and Death of Jesus, when the Devil thought he'd defeated God in the final battle.

How deluded he was!!

At the beginning of this month, our Bishops completed their ten-day

*ad limina apostolorum* visit to Rome: and each Bishop in the Catholic Church has to do this every five years as a body in their country groupings.

It's called an *ad limina apostolorum* visit because it means to the 'Threshold of the tombs of the Apostles.'

A personal pilgrimage to the Tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul: but also a visit to the Successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome.

They report on the spiritual health of their Dioceses and, towards the end of the visit, they have an individual meeting with the Pope where they can talk to him in total confidence on a one to one basis.

At the end of the *ad limina*, the Pope meets them as a body to reflect with them on how he sees the Church in this country is living out its commitment to Jesus Christ; and to give them advice, and pastoral guidance on how to move forward.

As I said at the beginning, the answer to how we can become more faithful Christians this Lent is to be found in Scripture and the teaching of the Church.

And what Pope Benedict said to our Bishops at the end of their *ad limina* visit is the teaching of the Church in action; speaking to the real, concrete circumstances we experience as Christians in this country.

He reminded the Clergy that they mustn't see themselves, or let themselves be seen, as mere 'Sacrament Dispensers.'

He said that we, the Clergy, must have: "Dedication to prayer, pastoral sensitivity towards you [the People of God] and passion for preaching the Gospel."

Pope Benedict XVI: Address to the Bishops of England and Wales February 1 2010

But he also reminded you, the Laity, to: "Recognise the difficulties [the Clergy] sometimes face on account of their declining numbers and increasing pressures."

As above

So Pope Benedict's call to us is that: "The Catholic community in [our] country needs to speak with a united voice. [And that all of us: Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Laity, must be] attentive to the promptings of the Spirit, who guides the whole Church into truth, gathers her into unity and inspires her with missionary zeal." As above

And the Pope also had a special word for you, the Laity, by reminding the Bishops of your gifts and talents.

He told them to: "Draw on the considerable gifts of the [Laity] in England and see that they are equipped to hand on the faith to new generations with a keen awareness that they are [actively] playing their part in the Church's mission." As above

You may have begun to wonder what all of this has to do with my Lent.

Well, it's to draw out the truth that we're not Christians in isolation; we belong to the Church.

We must celebrate Lent together, so that when Easter comes we're ready, as the Church in this Parish and Pastoral Area of the Diocese of Portsmouth, to tell our families, our friends, our neighbours, that Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Then, the wilderness of this world will begin to retreat in the hearts of men and women, because, in the words of the Easter hymn: "Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been: Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green."

John M. C. Crum: Now The Green Blade Riseth

Cardinal John Henry Newman, whom Pope Benedict will Beatify during his visit to England in September, preached a sermon in 1852 in which he saw what he called a 'Second Spring' - a renewal, an awakening - for the Catholic Church in our country.

I think we're 'ad limina' - on the threshold - of that 'Second Spring.'

However, there won't be a 'Second Spring' unless each one of us comes to own the faith for ourselves by coming to know Jesus as our best and closest friend.

You know: "There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know Him and speak to others of our friendship with Him." Pope Benedict XVI: Inauguration Homily April 2005

Because: "Our happiness depends, in the end, on the encounter with Jesus and on friendship with Him." Pope Benedict XVI: Address to Students 10 April 2006

In his Letter to the Romans, the second reading, Paul says: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Rm. 10: 9

Most of us, I guess, were Baptised as babies; so someone else, on our behalf, confessed with their mouth that Jesus is Lord.

Perhaps you've never come to the point in your life where you've said for yourself, and believed in your heart, that Jesus is my Lord.

Never owned for yourself the gift of faith that was given to you at the font.

Let's all seek out that experience this Lent.

Then, when we come to renew our Baptismal promises at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night, let's really mean them because we've been surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ, and have come to know Him as not only my Lord but my friend.

Then, the 'Second Spring' will begin to blossom: "For the winter is now past, the rain is over and gone. [and] The flowers have appeared in our land." Song of Songs 2: 11 - 12