

21 February 2021, The 1st Sunday of Lent: Psalm 25:8

From the 8th verse of Psalm 25, which we prayed moments ago: *(God) guides the humble in doing right and teaches his way to the lowly.*

There are 2 traditional “actions” of Lent: letting go and taking on. We are bidden to let go of whatever in our lives fosters and feeds our rebellion against God. Perhaps someone has already asked: what are you giving up for Lent? Think about this not as giving up for Lent but of letting go for the sake of your relationship with God. What thoughts, actions, habits, words, assumptions are negative, unhelpful, damaging to maturing as a Christian?

Letting go is different than giving up. ‘Giving up’ carries the connotation of defeat, as when we are at the end of our rope and give up because overwhelmed. There can also be a sense of ‘forced fun’—laboring to give up something we really would rather not. ‘Letting go’ carries the sense of liberation: discarding the useless, putting down the harmful; being released, set free. We let go to be free.

You ‘take on’ for the same purpose, practicing the thoughts, actions, habits, words, assumptions that speed you on the path of holiness but that have been neglected or done half-heartedly, sporadically, or never tried. As with letting go, we do not ‘take on for Lent.’ In Lent we begin or renew good habits of mind, body, and spirit that prepare us to receive ever more of God’s superabundant mercy, grace, and lovingkindness.

Letting go and taking on are built on a spiritual quality noted in the Psalm verse: *(God) guides the humble in doing right and teaches his way to the lowly.*

Letting go and taking on are possible through humility before God and with our fellow human beings. Without humility, what we let go and take on is an exercise in *self*-improvement, with little spiritual benefit.

Humility is NOT smart people pretending to be stupid, beautiful people believing they are ugly, talented people acting incompetent. Humility is not inferiority elevated to a virtue. Such posing indicates great pride and craving for attention.

Humility is the willingness to live with the failure, discomfort, and struggle of growing up in Christ. Assuming we are awful is no more humility than pretending we are perfect is righteousness. We are sinners being sanctified: knowing and living this truth is humility. In addition, our growth into Christ is an everlasting thing: there is no satisfying plateau on which we may rest indefinitely. While God gives us times of rest and refreshment, these are impermanent. We are always to grow beyond the present reality of our life in Christ. We ought never brag about ‘how far we have come,’ or bemoan ‘how far we yet must go,’ because God leads us at every step. We can never claim a summit from which we may look down on others.

An irony and blessing of following Jesus is that the deeper we go, the more we live in expectation of further growth in Christ: the sure knowledge that while God loves you just as you are, God loves you too much to leave you just as you are. Such expectant hope can often be experienced as struggle that discomforts, even hurts. For something new to come the old must give way, perhaps even die—seldom easy or painless; at times we suffer setbacks, we weary, feel lost, tempted to capitulate, admit defeat, are devoid of human strength. The old words for such a state are sloth and despair. Christian hope tells us that this mental, physical, spiritual apathy is a good place to find ourselves because, despite our sense of struggle and failure, the Christ-life most surely grows in us, whether we are aware or not, in our weakness. It is in that sense of weakness and our need for reliance on God’s power at work in us that life in Christ is truly lived. Know that in the birth pangs of Christ’s life being born anew in you, strength and pride hinder us; in our weakness Christ reveals and gives his grace and power.

Be humble before God and everyone simply and directly. Let go what keeps you from wanting God. Let go your failures, pride, need for control, and self-reliance as often as necessary. Every day, hour, if need be every minute. This is not about giving up something for Lent but letting go from now on what inhibits God’s grace. Trust God’s power to save.

Ask God to completely fill you. Again, often—daily, hourly, minute by minute. Admit your weaknesses to God, known and unknown, and rely on God’s wisdom and power at work in you. Prepare yourself for God to be at work in you by taking on the rhythms, forms, and life of prayer, worship, study, habits of mind, acts of mercy that will speed you on your journey in Christ. Be expectant and humble; judge no one but yourself, and that gently; do, speak, and think for the glory of God.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.