



## The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter - February 2008

### Keeping Lent – Eastern Style

**L**ENT IN THE WEST was a good deal stricter in former times than it is now. Often a large veil – the Curtain – was set up between choir and altar, like the veil of the Temple, so that no one could see the holy mysteries. Statues and crosses were often veiled throughout Lent. There were processions from one church to another on Wednesdays and Fridays – barefoot in the cloisters of monasteries – and there were extra services: the Office of the Dead on Mondays, the Gradual Psalms on Wednesdays, the Penitential Psalms on Fridays. It was a time for public penitence and, as nowadays, for preparation for Baptism. Dietary rules were much stricter.

The Orthodox Church of the East has maintained more of its Lenten discipline than the West. Great Lent in the East is preceded by a special period of preparation known as the *Triodion*. During this four-week period, the faithful are constantly informed of the approach of Lent and are instructed to expect its coming and accept its teachings and message, through special prayers and readings and the gradual elimination of rich foods. During the *Triodion*, Meat Fare Sunday is the last day for eating meat, and Cheese Fare Sunday (the equivalent of the old Western *Septuagesima*) the last day for dairy products. Monday after Cheese Fare Sunday is the first day of Great Lent. Known as 'Pure Monday' or 'Clean Monday', it marks the official beginning of the Lenten period and, rather like our Ash Wednesday, is a day of strict fasting from foods and of spiritual exercise through good works, reading the writings of the Fathers and going to Confession. Great Lent was set aside from the earliest times as a special period of prayer, self-examination and self-denial.

The Orthodox Lenten diet is one free of luxurious foods. There is no meat and no fish with bones (shell fish are permitted, no doubt a reflection on the Greek marine economy). Dairy products are avoided and olive oil is used sparingly. Denying physical pleasure – such as the pleasure of eating - strengthens willpower, acts as a de-tox. and aids spiritual warfare against evil and the devil. During Great Lent, Orthodox Christians also fast mentally and spiritually by reviewing their personal life with all its sins, bad habits and shortcomings. They make every effort to abolish these things from their lives by seeking to make lasting changes for the better. Denying pleasures and making small sacrifices, they seek to bear their hardships in patience and faith and be more careful about their thoughts, words, and deeds. They try to imitate the self-discipline of Jesus in the wilderness. And they ask forgiveness from those whom they have hurt or wronged. During Lent, Orthodox Christians try to perform acts of charity, such as visiting the sick, consoling the bereaved and giving assistance to the poor.

It may be time for us in the West to look again and see if we can recover something of the depth and richness of the more ancient practices of keeping Lent. There is surely more to it than curbing a sweet tooth and shedding the Christmas kilos.

May you have a blessed and holy Lent.

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