

PASTORAL LETTER
FROM THE BISHOP OF EAST ANGLIA
SIXTH ORDINARY SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
FEBRUARY 15 2015

*This Pastoral Letter is to be read out at all Masses during the weekend
February 14/15*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
the climax of the Christian Year is the celebration of the Death and Resurrection of the Lord.

In the early Church, it was celebrated each week on Saturday night. Christians met, often in secret, to pray and to sing and to listen to the scriptures. Then as the sun rose and dawn broke they celebrated the Eucharist.

Gradually, the early Christians began to mark the actual time of the year when these sacred events took place with even greater solemnity. This special celebration, which took place at the time of the Jewish Passover Feast, had tremendous significance for them and for us. The Jewish Passover celebrates God's mighty work of releasing the Jewish people from their slavery to the Egyptians and of leading them into the promised land. The Christian Passover, Holy Week and Easter, celebrates God's mighty work of releasing all peoples, of every time and place, from slavery to sin and of opening the way to eternal life in the promised land of heaven.

From the beginning, the Easter Liturgy of Holy Saturday, the Vigil of the Lord's Resurrection Day, has been central to the Christian celebration.

In the early Church, it was on this night that all those who had been preparing to become Christians were baptised, confirmed and received the Eucharist for the first time.

Three days of fasting were observed by all Christians to prepare for this Easter Liturgy. These three days later became one week. Then the Holy Week became forty days of preparation to correspond with the forty days that our Lord spent in the desert in preparation for his public ministry.

So today, our present forty days of Lent, are a solemn preparation for the celebration of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord which is kept over the last three days of Holy Week – Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Day.

The great Vigil service of Holy Saturday night, links us with the early Church as we celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord with unbounded joy and gladness. It is at the heart of our celebrations. During the Vigil, we too will welcome new Converts into the communion of the Church as they are Baptised, Confirmed and receive the Holy Eucharist for the first time.

It is a time of new life – a time of return and renewal – a time of excitement and anticipation.

Lent begins next Wednesday. The Church invites us to keep these days with Praying, Fasting and Almsgiving. They all have to do with re-connecting our relationships with God, with each other and with ourselves.

Fasting is a way of waking up to ourselves and realising how enslaved we can become to our appetites. Fasting concentrates the mind wonderfully! It helps us to fix our eyes on God, from whom all life comes, by whom all life is sustained. It helps us stand in solidarity with those who have little of this life's goods. It prompts us to act on their behalf with generosity and justice.

Almsgiving is also a way of re-ordering our relationships with others. It is not just a matter of giving money to good causes. It calls us to give something of ourselves – our time, our talents – to others. It calls us to be reconciled where things have gone wrong in a relationship or friendship. Fixing our eyes on God, we attempt to live up to the outgoing, spontaneous generosity of God himself.

And finally Prayer, the word we use to express our longing for God. So Lent is a time when we give extra time to wait upon him in stillness and silence. Our friendship with him will deepen, our longing for him will grow. And remember - when we are there before him, so are all the people and those situations that we hold in our hearts. Centred on God himself, looking to follow his will, we discover that this is the best way of living our lives. Everything else follows.

Today and during the week, the leaflet that the New Evangelisation Team has produced will be made available for our use. It provides us with more ideas as to how we might live out these three pillars of Lent – Prayer, Almsgiving, Fasting - during these six weeks. Always remember that Lent is a season of inward growth in order that we might witness to the Gospel of love and mercy in our world.

May God fill you with his grace and enable you to keep a really good Lent!

Yours devotedly,

The Right Revd Alan S Hopes