

Dear Friends and Visitors

Fr Mark's homily for Ash Wednesday:

When St Benedict says that the entire life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent (RB 49), he means our return to God. He calls it the search for God (RB 7:27, 58:7). Lent is about search for, returning, to God, and so is the monk, and that is why our life ought to be a continuous Lent. There is something, though, of a reversal of roles in this talk about the monk's seeking and returning to God. It makes God the object and we the active agent. In fact, it's the other way round, and Benedict knew this.

You don't have to get very far into the Prologue of the Rule before you start finding things like: he has already counted us his sons; his gifts which are in us; the light from God, the voice from heaven everyday calling us.... "Come!" God is the one seeking his workman. He calls, even yells, "Is anyone there?"

As for any good the monk does, it is the Lord's power, not their own. The Lord waits, the Lord supplies the grace to do to our nature which by itself can't.

Lent, then, is really the time for us to be found. It is true, the prophet Joel in the first reading calls us to return to God. But in those mere seven verses we heard just now, Joel uses eight different words nine times to talk about the tenderness of God: God's mercy is there before we get a notion to move; his compassion is the already-in-place situation that makes what we like to think of as our search for him really our being found at last.

Paul does the same thing. "Be reconciled to God," he says. But then he makes it clear that our being reconciled is simply not letting the already-on-offer grace of God go to waste. "I have heard you," Paul has God say, "I have helped you." Lent is the time for us simply to receive that humbly.

With a phrase of eight words Paul tells us just what that grace of God looks like, that help and that hearing. "He who knew no sin God made sin, for us." There is a shock and violence in those eight words that make Mel Gibson's film look like Cinderella.

Paul smashes God. In Jesus Christ, God in human form and crucified, God himself takes from us once and for all the god we would like to keep as the passive object of our manipulating and self-serving search. God is not "on our side," over against the "other." God is us, for the other, especially the one who would be our enemy.

So God smashes us, too. Because of that grace already in place and the astounding exchange of just for sinner, we are not the nerd and jerk we down deep think we are; we are God for others, the righteousness of God, almsgiving, prayer and sacrifice, here. The Temple.

Lent is a time to find ourselves as found by God who has chosen to be God in the world in large part in us, his secret place.

As in years past, before Compline on Tuesday before Ash Wednesday the community gathered

in the Chapter Room for the reading of chapter 49 of the Rule of St Benedict, and the distribution of the Lenten books (see Rule of St Benedict chapter 48:15-16). As has been our custom at Ava, each evening during Lent a bell sounds at 7:00 p.m. This is the signal for all the brothers to devote the time remaining before Complin to lectio.

In addition to the distribution of the Lenten books, at the same Tuesday evening gathering Fr Abbot presented the postulant's habit to Br Bernard (Kevin) Fitzgerald. Bernard was a temporarily professed monk of Ava who, for personal reasons, had to leave the Abbey after his vows expired seven years ago, always with the hope of eventually resuming the monastic life at Ava. He has finally been able to do that, and we are happy to have him back. Br Bernard was, in fact, the very first fruitcake baker. He has resumed that responsibility now.

Speaking of the bakery, the 17th fruitcake season began February 5, after the traditional January hiatus. During the 16th season we listened carefully to customer feedback. We have learned from that feedback ways we can make an excellent and valued product even better! In addition, we have formed a Bakery Committee that meets once a month to coordinate the bakery activities, to oversee production techniques and business practices. Each monthly meeting includes a ritual like sampling of a cake baked chosen at random from the output since the previous meeting, that way ensuring the presence of all members at each meeting.

February 2 was the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. Our custom is to gather in the Chapter room before the Office of Lauds. There, with subdued lighting, we have the blessing and lighting of the candles, and then the procession into the Church, the Temple of the Lord. Fr Richard was present with us for the blessing of the candles. He was in his "geri-chair," the mobile recliner he generally uses to get around the house. Like the rest of us, Fr Richard held a hymn sheet in one hand and a flaming candle in the other. But unlike the rest of us, Fr Richard's two hands drift toward one another with the inevitable result. While most of us had our eyes fixed on our hymn sheets as we were singing away, Br Bernard glanced up and saw the flames arising from the paper in Fr Richard's left hand. Bernard dashed across the Chapter Room, knocked the burning paper to the ground, and stomped it dead out. Fr Richard was smiling delightedly, and Fr Mark remarked how Fr Richard had imitated the Desert Father who, when asked about how to pray, raised his hands to heaven and, with tongues of fire coming out of each finger, replied, "Why not become all flame?"

A man from Biloxi, MS, commenced his six week observership in early February. There are now several fine candidates at various stages of discerning a vocation here at Ava. One, from Norway, will begin his observership in May. A few others will come in March for longer or shorter visits and conversations.

February 18 – 20 was the Heartland Benedictine Vocation Directors Meeting, annually held here at Ava. Besides our own Br Francis and Fr Filomeno, ten monks and nuns from monasteries in the mid-west convened for the informal and always fruitful meeting.

You will notice a new feature on our web page, the Index to the accumulated Newsletters posted here. This Index is the work of one of the Associates of Assumption Abbey, who was assisted by our webmaster, Dennis Day. We are deeply grateful to this kind Associate who in a very short time turned the expressed wish of Fr Abbot into a living reality. St Benedict would be very pleased at this kind of “obedience.”

Fr Richard Fox, OCSO, continues in a weakened condition. He is receiving excellent care here in the Abbey. The new senior wing/infirmarium is proving a real blessing. The monks, directed by Fr Cyprian, infirmarian, have shown the greatest love and generosity in caring for Fr Richard. Fr Richard also enjoys the professional help of a local home care service whose staff has bonded with us in a marvelous way, and, most recently, of Community Hospice of Mountain View. We ask our friends to please keep Fr Richard in their prayers.

On March 12 Dom Francis Michael, superior of Holy Spirit Abbey, Conyers, GA, will arrive for his first visit to Assumption Abbey. On the 15th he, Br Tobias, and Fr Mark will drive to New Melleray Abbey, Iowa. Francis Michael and Mark will attend the biennial Meeting of the US Region, OCSO, March 15-24, held at New Melleray. Br Tobias, a monk of New Melleray on loan to Ava, will take advantage of the trip to visit his own community for the week.

On the first Sunday of Lent, Fr Mark delivered this talk to the monks in Chapter:

Chapter Talk – February 29 2004 1 Cor 15 I

We have arrived at Chapter 15 in 1 Corinthians. This is the next to the last chapter, but really it is the end. The literally concluding chapter, Chapter 16, is more like the last blessing at Mass, preceded by a few announcements: next week's second collection, travel plans, and some local news. So Chapter 15 is really Paul's last word of in letter, the final course of banquet that has been Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.

Someone who knows a lot more than I do has said that chapter 15 “forms not only the close and crown of the whole epistle, but also provides the key to its meaning from which light is shed onto the whole.” In any case, just think would our Christian faith be without this chapter, or our liturgy. Here are just a few of the sound bites put together in a chain that throughout the Christian centuries have enriched and nourished and given rise to liturgical texts and rites, poetry, spiritual meditations, hymns, prayers, homilies, holy cards, devotions, and retreat

conferences, as well as theological treatises. In chapter 15 you find:

I handed on to you what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures (3-4).

If Christ has not been raised your faith is in vain; you are still in your sins (17).

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are the most pitiable people of all (19).

But now Christ has been raised, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep (20).

Just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life, but each in proper order (22).

If the dead are not raised: Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die (32).

It is sown corruptible; it is raised incorruptible. It is sown dishonorable; it is raised glorious. It is sown weak; it is raised powerful. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body (43-44).

The first man, Adam, became a living being, the last Adam a life-giving spirit.

Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God (50).

I shall tell you a mystery. We shall not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed (51).

And finally:

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (57).

I think that all of this, and this entire chapter 15, is summarized and condensed in one other thing Paul says in this chapter: By the grace of God, he says, I am what I am (10).

That's true of us, too. That's why Paul said it. We are what we are not because of our heredity or our education or our skills and accomplishments or our connections or our spiritual experience or our emotional health or disease or our sexual orientation; we are what we are because of something called grace that comes from outside us, so to speak, but that is now both potentially and actually our real identity.

When I say grace comes from outside us I am just using an image. Grace is not a thing and it has not location or any need to come and go. At the same time, though, grace is not given with human generation, like your DNA or like the color of our eyes, or even like our eyes themselves. You expect a baby to be born with eyes. When it is not you know that something's wrong, that something's missing that should be there.

Grace is not expected in that way. You could say that grace is more like a surprise party, but that's not quite it either. Because as your 25th wedding anniversary gets close, or on 75th birthday, you secretly start days in advance practicing to act surprised when everyone jumps up from behind couches and chairs when you walk into the room. You make up a little speech that will make it sound that your really speechless but without embarrassing yourself. You expect a surprise party; you expect it because you know you deserve it and you do, and you're kind of disappointed when you come home and there's just the dog and your wife who's expecting your to take her out to dinner, and your disappointment is understandable.

But grace is totally unexpected, totally surprising, and totally undeserved. That is why it is grace, which means gift and free, and it is this undeserved off-your-guard-catching you surprise of God that makes you really what you are.

Up to this point in his first letter to them, Paul has been telling the Corinthians that the Christian life is nothing else but letting the entire party, all the guests, the balloons, the champagne, the flowers and the gifts wrapped in silver and gold foil, with the cake and ice cream, and the love and kindly regard for you that they all stand for – letting it all seep into you and become, finally, not outside any more, but inside, not unnatural, but as native as the marrow of your bones. You are, finally and all unplanned, what you are, by the grace of God, not by your handsome parents or by the love and support of your friends.

Now, in chapter 15, Paul is drawing all this out beyond the dust and dark of the grave. For the what that you are by grace, grace has still more surprises in store. I was happy to find this affirmed by a commentary on 1 Corinthians. “Undeserved, unmerited grace which springs from the free, sovereign love of God alone and becomes operative in human life not only determines Paul’s life and...vocation but also characterizes all Christian existence, not least the promise of resurrection.” It is a wonderful chapter for Lent and Easter, and for a time when one of us grace-filled monks finds the vital signs of his terrestrial sojourn getting weaker. That it should be the chapter before us at this time was not foreseen when this series of talks began three and a half years ago. So that, too, is gift of grace.

Fr Mark, Abbot