

LENTEN BUILD-UP¹

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MORE than once it has been said that it is no use playing a harp to a jackass! I suppose we can see in such an assertion the obvious truth of the saying of St Thomas that whatever is received, is received according to the disposition of the receiver, and that's why the harpist ignores the jackass. Possibly too that's why the jackass does not bother to sqawk to the harpist! It seems to cut both ways.

The Tchaikovsky enthusiast might be quite ecstatic about a superb rendering of the Nutcracker Suite, but even he would not feel so enthusiastic about it if at the time he had a raging toothache. To the true appreciation of such music he could only hope to return when the toothache stopped and his disposition was better.

With all of us dispositions count a great deal, and when for example we are faced with the penitential season of Lent so much depends on having a well-disposed state of mind. If you cared to put this mode of disposition into a useful working phrase you might word it (and word it so that it means something): 'I'll try to make a good Lent.' This actual disposition is surely an over-all obligation, not only for Lent but for all true Christian endeavour. It is therefore to be understood not in any narrowed down sense but as widely and as comprehensively as possible.

Lent covers about six weeks, which doesn't sound very long; but if you are to take upon yourself something worth doing for God even for the short space of six weeks, it can appear quite a long business. Still, six weeks pass by fairly quickly, and their wise use should help us not merely for that short while but for the rest of our lives. In other words, what we do for Lent should not be divorced from the rest of our Christian endeavour. Let us make a simple application or two of what we mean. If I am a very heavy drinker and manage by the help of God and real perseverance to 'go on the waggon' or abstain from all intoxicating drink for the whole of Lent, only to get blind drunk on Easter

1. This article was received too late to appear in the February number. But there is still enough of Lent to run for it to have relevance.

Sunday, then my abstinence will not have served a very useful purpose, will it? Similarly, if I smoke heavily and resolve to give it up for Lent and whilst doing so go about the place like a bear with a sore toe making everybody else miserable (just because of my resolve), then what good is being done? Certainly it would be better in that case to smoke moderately and at the same time make a real effort to be charitable in all circumstances at home. We must enter into such resolves intelligently and endeavour to be constructive, just as the builder is once he has built good foundations. You may not agree with me when I say that the majority of people have an enormous amount of good in them. This good can be worked on and brought out effectively, but so much depends on the kind of approach we make. Some years ago I was bundled into the cell of a murderer almost before I had taken my bearings of the outside of the cell. When I arrived in a hurry and found myself sitting on his bench I said very quietly, 'Well, how are you, Charlie?' He received me kindly in spite of the fact that he was not a Charlie! He saw that I wanted to be friendly and at once he 'let me in'. He was a very nice fellow really—not as a murderer, of course—but we got on well together and I found there was such a lot of good in him that it was quite heartening to be locked in his cell! It seems to me that it is safe then for me to assume that there is a lot of good even in the worst of us, but what all of us need is that kind of encouragement which will bring down the scales on the side of good, and keep them weighed down. From the start of life the scales are weighed against us because we are the children of Adam. When we are baptized the balance moves over to the other side; we become the adopted children of God and the whole situation improves. True enough, as we all know from personal experience, the effects of Adam's sin continue to touch us most intimately, but these can be overcome by fidelity to grace and the constant effort to be worthy of Christ. That is what we must do to keep the scales weighed down on our side and in our favour.

In his epistle to the Romans St Paul speaks of his struggles and he puts his difficulties into these words, the very kind of words we would use to express our own perplexities: 'What I do is not what I wish to do, but something which I hate', and he goes on to say: 'Of this I am certain, that no principle of good dwells in me, that is, my natural self; praiseworthy intentions are always ready

to hand, but I cannot find my way to the performance of them; it is not the good my will prefers, but the evil my will disapproves, that I find myself doing' (vii, 15ff.).

Notice how St Paul says: 'What I do is not what I wish to do, but something which I hate'. Most of us have shared this experience with him at some time or other, don't you think? We would like to be saints, as every follower of Christ should be, but we know so well how failure is rather our hallmark. This humble acknowledgment should not depress us, but rather spur us on to much better efforts for Christ. From the depths we should look to the heights. We should draw encouragement even from failure, in that it invites us to look up to Christ who himself told us that 'If I shall be lifted up I will draw all men to myself'.

We must not only show goodwill but we must exercise it. Mere goodwill by itself is not much use, just as faith without good works is dead, but knit to the help of God it is a potent factor, it is what saints are made of. Each of us should strive after sanctity and keep up the endeavour. Getting to God is not easy, it was never intended that it should be, but that does not mean that it is not eminently worth while. We have to bear in mind habitually that we were made for the blessed vision of God and that indeed is a worth-while project. And because we are all creatures of habit we should daily try to see that our habits are not stumbling-blocks to our final purpose. Success for us means living with God, that is the crown of life. Loss of God at the end of this sojourn is the ultimate failure, and it's a failure that results from our failure as followers here in the vale of tears. We might be tremendous successes in the eyes of the world. You see yourselves how many folk whose moral integrity is *nil* are lauded by the world. Their pathetic fidelity to the passing and the not-worth-while is terribly sad. Their zeal may be commended; would that we had as much for God and the things of God. St Paul has a special word for the 'worldling'—and there are many Catholics who are really worldly. All who live nominal Christian lives, and give more time to the temporal than to the spiritual, might reflect on these telling words of St Paul, who says: 'If you live a life of nature you are marked out for death' (Rom. viii, 13); and if you still wish to hang on tenaciously to the things of this world maybe St Peter's words will have some effect on you: 'All mortal things are like grass', he says, 'and all their glory like the bloom of grass;

the grass withers and its bloom falls' (1 Peter i, 24). These quotations can give us a directive and a sense of true values. Does not St Paul himself say in his epistle to the Philippians: 'And this is my prayer for you; may your love grow richer and richer yet, in the fulness of its knowledge and depth of its perception, so that you may learn to prize what is of value' (i, 9)? Maybe we have the right dispositions but lack the zeal any effort might ask of us. When it comes to making effort we must have the dispositions as the basic characteristic, *plus* the zeal for the requisite build up. Our aim must be to become real friends of Christ, and we know only too well his conditions for friendship. 'You are my friends', he said, 'if you do the things that I tell you' (John xv, 10). He asks many things of us, it's true, but all of them are embodied in the simple demand of love and it is love that proves us. And here we are, faced with six weeks of Lent in which to express our love, rather reluctant to open up our hearts and be generous! These six weeks, we repeat, are important in terms of laying foundations, and most of us need our foundations of Christian following looking to, because we are so lethargic, and lacking in zeal for betterment. We must therefore examine ourselves on our dispositions for real betterment. The obstacles must be overcome and cast out, the voids must be filled with love, the pursuit of good must be a passion, and its execution a rule of Christian life. If we are to be friends of Christ for all eternity then we must be friends of Christ here and now, and his condition for friendship still stands, just as it did on the day he uttered it. It lies in doing his will, doing the thing he tells us to do.

We may laugh when we hear it said that it's not much use playing a harp to a jackass, but we should not be far from tears when we think of the call to friendship Christ has made to us over the years, and of the feebleness of our response. 'You honoured me with your lips, but your heart was far from me.' Can this be said of you, dear reader? If it can, don't lose heart about it, rather lift up your heart, seek forgiveness, go and be fed with the eucharist, and for the rest of life's pilgrimage travel with Christ and become his friend by doing what he has told you. Success at the end will make all the endeavour well worth while.