

Lent I: Faith in search of understanding

So here we are at the threshold of another Lent. Another Lent it is true and yet, at the same time, something never before experienced, a path completely untrodden, just waiting for us to set out in company with Christ. Today's Collect gives us the programme for the coming weeks, so simple and yet plumbing the depths of Christian discipleship: *Almighty God, grant that through the annual practices of this holy Lenten season we may come to an understanding of the mystery of Christ and follow where he leads us by our worthy way of life.*

Two requests: first that *we may come to an understanding of the mystery of Christ.* In his Proslogion, which he sub-titled *Faith in search of understanding*, Saint Anselm, the 11th Italian Benedictine monk who became Archbishop of Canterbury wrote: *¹I long to understand in some degree thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand.*

Saint Paul puts it slightly differently in his letter to the Corinthians, though he is likewise expressing the vital place of understanding in our Christian faith: *²If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. What*

¹ Proslogion Ch 1:150-157

² 1 Corinthians 14:14-15

am I to do ? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also. Saint Benedict echoed Saint Paul in chapter 19 of the Rule – *The Discipline of Singing the Psalms*:³ *So, let us consider how we ought to behave in the presence of God and his angels and let us stand to sing so that our mind and our voice may be in harmony.*

So in this season of Lent we are encouraged both to feed our hearts and our minds, by prayer and by our Lenten reading, that our capacity both to understand and to love may be nurtured and find expression in our way of living. And that is the second request the Collect makes: that we might *follow where he leads us by our worthy way of life*, by our *conversatio*.

Conversatio is a word we meet in the Rule of Saint Benedict. Indeed we write it in the schedule of the vows we place on the altar at Solemn Profession. It expresses the reality of our daily lives, the dialogue in which we engage both with ourselves, with God and with those with whom we live. In the Collect we pray that *we may follow where Christ leads us by our worthy way of life*: it gives us the practical perspective on our Christian faith, which we have inherited from the Jewish tradition. The Book of Deuteronomy puts it quite simply:⁴ *The word is very near*

³ RB 19:6-7

⁴ Deuteronomy 30.14

to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

So, in this Collect for the first Sunday of Lent we have the blueprint for our journey, for our way of living the next few weeks in company with the Lord. We also have the comfort of his presence as the post-Communion prayer reminds us: *Refreshed with bread from heaven, which nourishes our faith, advances our hope and strengthens our love, we ask, Lord, that we may learn to hunger for him who is the living and true bread and to live by every word which comes from your mouth.* A word that is very near to us, but for a purpose, to bring us body, soul and spirit to his kingdom and to his company.