



February is an interesting month, having come through history with several name changes. Beginning in Roman times as the month of purification (from februum - purification) it was the last month in the lunar calendar until around 450 BC, and contained many observances. Throughout the northern hemisphere, the name usually reflected some aspect of the weather, particularly ice and snow, although mud and even kale (from the cabbage family!) figured in Old English. Ultimately, February won out.

In Catholic tradition, February retained the theme of the older Roman times by being recognised as the Month of Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary although the Second Vatican Council encouraged setting aside months of observance in favour of recognising individual solemnities, memorials and feast days throughout the year.

There are quite a few saints' days in February which we would recognise: St Brigid, St Blaise (when we bless throats, St Agatha, St Paul Miki and Companions, St Scholastica, and so on – even St Valentine, who, giving pride of place to Saints Cyril and Methodius in the calendar, still has popular support.

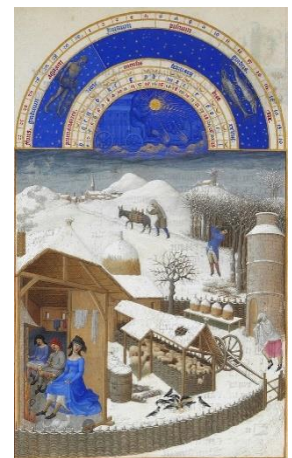
On February 2nd, Candlemas, which is both the Feast of the Presentation in the Temple and the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary – both fulfilling requirements of Mosaic Law, we recognise the role of the Jewish faith in Jesus' childhood. In Matthew 5:17, he reminds us that he has come to fulfil the Law, not to abolish it; although this role is going to cost him dearly as he tries to bring the people into a different relationship with God from that to which they have been accustomed.

As Ash Wednesday commonly – although not always – occurs in February, this month becomes a time of journeying for us as we accompany Christ towards the Cross. Pope Francis reminds us time and time again that we are called to accompaniment, especially with those who are vulnerable and needy, although none of us should ever feel that we walk alone. Our devotions during Lent are intended to bring us into closer relationship with the Lord, a relationship that is hoped to reach a highpoint on Easter Sunday and bring an experience of conversion. And then keep going and growing.

Lent should mean more to us than giving up chocolate, although it perhaps easier to make this kind of gesture than to invest the spiritual energy we are called to give. Lent is a penitential season which calls us to fasting, prayer and almsgiving. In a sense, these three requirements are a way of fulfilling the two Great Commandments which Jesus gave us in Matthew 22:36-40: in following them, we turn our attention to God and to our neighbour, rather than focusing on our own appetites. When we fast, we share solidarity with those who are hungry; when we give alms, we concretely address their hunger and try to alleviate it. When we pray we, as the Body which has Christ as its head, offer up our desire that "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven".

Fasting can also be from other than food; perhaps we fast from gossip, or complaining, envy or self-indulgences of other kinds. But fasting has no particular spiritual benefit unless it is tied to solid contemplation of the reason we are doing it. Matthew 6:1-18 is the passage we hear on Ash Wednesday and one to which we can return time and time again as a source of spiritual challenge and inspiration. Rather than seeing Lent as a time to be sullen and sombre, we are called to join the journey with joy and energy. "Come let us go rejoicing to the house of the Lord!" (Psalm 122)

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