

Along the track

What is Lent?

Michael Leunig offers a very appropriate prayer for Lent:

On this day (at this time),
your gift to us O God,
help us to move simply:
To look softly:
To allow emptiness:
To let the heart create for us,

Lent is not just a time for penance, or self denial, it also offers us the gift of time to reassess, to think again, so that we can become more sensitive and aware of the invitation of God to friendship. As Boris Pasternak put it: *When God knocks on the door of your life, it is often no louder than the beating of your heart and so it is very easy to miss it.* Lent is offered to help us not to miss it.

Allowing some emptiness into our busy lives, stopping for a while to let the heart create is a gift to ourselves. Our lives are so crowded and full, and our world is so noisy that we cannot always hear the voice of God calling to us and speaking to us of God's love for us. When that wise man Solomon was made king in his late teens, he did not pray for all knowledge or great power or riches but for the gift of a listening heart.

Lent is a time to pause so that our hearts may listen and discover again just how much we are loved by God. As John put it, we are able to love because we come to understand that God loves us first (1 John 4 19). And continues to do so. We can often think of many reasons why God might not love us, but the simple fact is, God does! Jesus repeatedly told us that, over and over again in his actions and in his parables and ultimately in his death. When we come to realise that we are loved, we have the courage for honest self-appraisal. We have the courage to change our minds, to change our hearts. But that relies on coming to understand what God loving us first can mean.

That realisation should not make us smug or self-satisfied. We cannot grow as Christians, and we cannot even find lasting happiness unless we gain freedom from the things that bind us and those actions that diminish us. Each of us in our own way is imprisoned by attitudes, habits, compulsions so we tend to love less, we resent more, we do less for others. Repentance, being sorry gives us *the capacity to receive the love God wants to give us*, what God wants for us.

Lent helps people to discover the reality of God in their lives, God's invitation to a deeper friendship, a new way. Usually that realisation comes when we allow ourselves to move simply, when we open ourselves to emptiness.

I read this story some years ago about Patrick White, the Nobel Prize winning Australian novelist. He wrote of a defining moment in his life: "During what seemed like months of rain I was carrying a tray load of food to a wormy litter of pups down at the kennels when I slipped and fell on my back, dog dishes shooting in all directions. I lay where I had fallen, half-blinded by rain under a pale sky, cursing through watery lips a God in whom I did not believe. I began laughing finally at my own helplessness and hopelessness, in the mud and the stench from my filthy oilskin. It was a turning point. My disbelief appeared as farcical as my fall. At that moment I was truly humbled". He later wrote in a letter: "What I am increasingly intent on doing in my books is to give professed unbelievers glimpses of their own unprofessed faith."

The invitation from God, as White discovered, can come in many ways. God doesn't make it difficult for us – we are the ones who do that. We only have to open our eyes but perhaps more importantly, our hearts. We find God first with our hearts, then with our minds. God is not an intellectual problem to be solved. God is a rather, as some theologians suggest, a beckoning word and we are asked to listen, to make ourselves more attentive to whatever beckons, however small or tentative.

St Francis de Sales wrote: "Let us be what we are and be that well." Ultimately, that means letting ourselves be loved by God, it means being ourselves because that is who God made us to be.

Regards
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