

Along the track

Is Lent Easier?

‘What are you giving up for Lent?’ we were asked. We gave up lollies, milk or sugar in our tea, I remember my father not being able to eat eggs, milk, cheese or butter. I have some vague memory that, on some days no food could be taken until 3pm, the hour of Jesus’ death. But then all that was relaxed.

So why was that easier?

Because there is so much more to Lent than just giving things up, no matter how beneficial that may be. In those early days I remember, there was a lot of discipline and following the rules, which was a big part of our faith and culture at that time, not surprisingly as we had just been through a world war where discipline and rules played a big part in saving the day. We were reminded often that we were ‘soldiers for Christ’ and many of our religious practices reflected that. Some pine for those days again when things were more defined, more certain. But there wasn’t much room for reflection, repentance or metanoia, a change of mind and heart, taking stock as it were. That is not meant to put down the past but there wasn’t much emphasis on fasting as a means of opening our minds and our hearts, opening our lives to the grace of God, preparing for the joy of the resurrection.

Our times are very different. We appear to be more connected than ever, social media is such a big part of our lives. Yet loneliness afflicts so many. Those wishing to divide us, to sow disharmony are also stronger than ever. There is widening inequality, where millions suffer from malnutrition while others waste food on an industrial scale.

Fasting is not just a personal or spiritual exercise – it is also a profoundly social one. ‘Giving up’ for Lent offers us the opportunity for ‘taking up’ too. Is there room on our Lenten journey for a bit of social justice, outreach, charity, for sensitivity to the needs of others? Lenten fasting challenges the idea that fulfilment is found in the material world. It asks us to reassess what we truly need, to think again about those who have so little, those for whom just to stay alive each day can be a desperate struggle.

Fasting is not just a relic of the past. We may not be asked to undertake this discipline with the rigour of the past but perhaps it may be even more relevant than ever. It can be a reminder that meaning, purpose and happiness in life are not found in wealth

and riches, in indulgence and luxury but depriving ourselves in such a conscious way, setting aside our material comforts helps us to step outside ourselves and to reflect on the needs of others. It can serve as a reminder that restraint, reflection and a deliberate turning inward, soul searching are not relics of the past. They are needed now more than ever.

Lenten fasting can be a quiet resistance to the world’s relentless pace, our need to be in touch at all times in case we might miss out, our relentless need for satisfaction. Maybe fasting may not always be about myself but it may help me to forgive a little more, to show love and compassion just that much more, to find ways to share more, to be involved, and we might even find that in giving up, we actually receive!

Pope Francis offered this invitation last Lent while he was so ill.

...all of us are pilgrims in this life; each of us is invited to stop and ask how our lives reflect this fact. Am I really on a journey, or am I standing still, not moving, either immobilized by fear and hopelessness or reluctant to move out of my comfort zone? It would be a good Lenten exercise for us to compare our daily life with that of some migrant or foreigner, to learn how to sympathize with their experiences and in this way discover what God is asking of us so that we can better advance on our journey to the house of the Father. This would be a good “examination of conscience” for all of us wayfarers. It means walking side-by-side, without shoving or stepping on others, without envy or hypocrisy, without letting anyone be left behind or excluded. Let us all walk in the same direction, tending towards the same goal, attentive to one another in love and patience.

Regards
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