

March 20th 2022 Short Reflection

I was brought up in the Church of Scotland, a denomination that didn't celebrate Lent. That came from the days of John Knox who did not approve of either Christmas, Lent or even Easter, due to their roots in "pagan" worship.

Lent was seen as something Catholics and Anglicans did but definitely NOT Presbyterians.

In recent years though, I have thought again about the spiritual opportunity given to us when we participate in Lent.

Lent has its roots in the days of early Christianity when it was a period of preparation for new believers. Those who wanted to become Christians engaged in 40 days of study and fasting as a preparation for their baptism on the Saturday night before Easter Sunday.

Lent also links back to Jesus' time in the wilderness after his baptism. In the synoptic Gospels it is recounted that Jesus was "led by the spirit in the wilderness where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days and when they were over he was famished". (Luke 4:2).

That led to the Christian tradition of fasting or giving something up for Lent.

This doesn't come naturally to us in our culture!

Why would anyone want to take up the spiritual practice of Lent and how could it be done?

Psalm 63 gives us some idea of why, and also points to some ways to do this.

The Psalm is attributed to David, who was hiding from danger in the wilderness of Judah. He expresses both a strong yearning for God in his time of struggle, and a deep sense of fulness and joy when that yearning is satisfied.

Like Jesus during his time in the wilderness, his deepest longing becomes clear when his life is reduced to fundamentals.

The apparent barrenness of Lent can help put us in touch with our own hunger for meaning. It can be a time when our roots reach deeper, seeking the nurturing and life-giving energy we draw from connection with the Sacred.

Reading the Psalm, I noticed all the verbs in it. They reflect ways we too can be more open and intentional towards this Source of abundance and generosity.

Let me pick them out.

I **seek**....**thirst**.... **looked** upon.....**beheld**.

My lips will **praise** you, I will **bless** you, **lift** up my hands, **call** on your name.

Think of you.... **meditate** on you..... **sing** for joy, **cling** to you.

Is there one of these words that you could adopt as a spiritual practice this Lent?

Would you like to “behold”, perhaps through contemplating art or taking photos?

Meditate slowly on some words?

Or wrap your hand round a holding cross?

Lent has been different for me this year and not by choice.

I broke my wrist after falling off my bike and that’s scuppered my plans for at least 6 weeks.

I can’t work, can’t drive, can’t play my flute, can’t swim, do yoga or ride my bike.

Internally, I’ve struggled with feeling guilty for not being able to do my bit at work when our whole health system is in crisis.

Generally this has been inconvenient rather than desperate!

But in keeping with the season of Lent, it has prompted some pretty basic questions.

“Who am I if I’m not being a nurse?”

“Will I be able to look after myself?”

“How should I spend my time?”

Most of these questions have resolved as time passed. With some creative planning and the support of friends, it’s been fine. And I’ve found this pruned down lifestyle has borne unexpected fruit.

I’ve had time to help with the transfer to ZOOM services these last couple of weeks, something that would have been difficult if I was working.

I’ve developed some patience with my limitations (still working on that one!)

I’ve been able to meditate on a poem a day using a book compiled by Janet Morley, a rich and satisfying experience.

Lastly I’ve joined with people from all round the world via ZOOM as we meditated together for peace in Ukraine. I intend to carry on doing that weekly until I return to work. In the face of the bombs and bullets it should feel inadequate. But instead, as I gazed at the icon of Jesus shown on the screen by the Polish woman leading our meditation,

it felt calm, hopeful and deeply moving.

We will never know what may come to fruition from these gatherings to pray together in silence.

I'd like to finish with a few words about Lent from the book by Janet Morley that I mentioned earlier.

“to keep Lent is to be deliberately reflective, but not to be passive. It is to anticipate the need for significant change in our lives, to be attentive to the possibility of being called to create something new”.

References:

Canlis J. April 2020 Christianitytoday.com “Love in the desert”

Morley J. 2011 “The heart’s time: a poem a day for Lent and Easter” SPCK London.

Reflection on the Luke reading

Today's gospel reading has two pieces in it – and sitting in this Lenten period, continues the theme in my mind, of preparation – what makes up a life lived following the way of Jesus?

How do we live day to day in the Jesus way? How do we think about others, ourselves, our world? How do our actions follow from our thoughts and beliefs about who we are to each other?

For me Lent is a turning inward, an intentional time to reflect on spiritual aspects of daily life.

One of the things I have always loved about the narratives in the bible is the humanness of them – how human nature is so often described!

In this first piece in the Luke reading we have a very human tendency to want to apportion blame.

In response to the question – why do bad things happen to people? Human beings who struggle as we do with uncertainty and not knowing, love to settle the matter by finding reasons.

The vengeful act of Pontius Pilate against the worshipping Galileans, the collapse of a tower near the pool of Siloam – the tragedies in our world of earthquake and cancer – we want to find reasons. Christians have unfortunately been well known to want to apportion blame – calling it punishment for sin. But there are newer versions of this too – cancer is a result of bitterness not expressed, newer, more new age varieties of blaming...

It's what we tend to do.

Luke's Jesus is very clear – the same thing will happen to you unless you repent. As Fred Craddock says in his commentary on Luke – Jesus rejects

attempts at such calculations, life in the kingdom is not an elevated game of gaining favours and avoiding losses.

The second little story in the gospel reading is the barren fig tree – I am struck by the fact that Luke may be retelling the story found in Mark and Matthew ‘the curse of the fig tree’ – where Jesus finds the tree bare of fruit and curses it – Luke though leaves open the possibility of redemption.

There are various strands to explore here – remembering who Luke was writing for – encouraging open-mindedness to the outsider and the marginalized. His message is one of compassion, hope, giving one more chance, don’t give up on anyone yet...

As we continue this Lenten journey – two thoughts I’ve taken away from Luke today:

One is to live the questions – becoming more comfortable with not knowing, we don’t know why terrible things happen, why tragedies occur.

The second is related – waiting, not giving up on the possibility of change, of growth and fruitfulness.

For me this always relates to how we think about others, following the Jesus way means not succumbing to our tendency to blame, accuse and distance ourselves from others.

Sometimes this is very hard to do – the recent protests in Wellington tested my personal limits as the building in which I worked was targeted and had to be locked. But when I looked at the groups who were represented there on parliament grounds I saw angry people, frightened people, and desperate people.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said - Jesus is calling us not to a new religion, but to life.

A discipline of patience, an intentional openness rather than closing down to blame, a daily practice of compassion.

I found many of these same thoughts captured so beautifully in the contemporary reading Anna will read now.

– from Edwina Gateley.