

The Hopefulness of Lent

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Ps 25: 1-10 and Mk 1: 9-15

I'm not sure if anyone noticed, at the planning stage, that today's 'Hospitality Sunday' at Hinde Street would be on the first Sunday of Lent. However, you'll be glad to hear that the 40 days of Lent *exclude* Sundays. They're mini feast-days punctuating the days of fasting and self-denial. So if you get offered second helpings of lunch today, knock yourselves out!

The great themes of Lent are fasting, prayer, repentance...

On this first Sunday of Lent, most Londoners won't be wrestling with how to live Lent well. Many will be piling into dim sum, noodles, bubble tea for Chinese New Year not very far from here. Which is fantastic – nothing wrong with it. But how do you approach fasting in a culture seems to encourage a permanent state of feasting – for those that can afford it? Or whose 'fasting' is 2 days out of seven, with a 500 calories' limit, and functions not as self-denial but to moderate the ill effects of all the feasting – and to improve my health, sex-appeal or longevity.

So I wonder about how we negotiate what can feel like a culture-clash. There are the ancient spiritual practices, and the faith in God, that we try to allow to shape our lives, on the one hand, and on the other, what can sometimes feel like a non-stop party of over-consumption, over-stimulation and over-spending that's going on alongside all that.

Or maybe that's just how it feels living on Piccadilly...!

The Church's preaching and teaching often critiques modern culture and its 'isms'. But the reality is that most of us spend quite a lot of time not in church, but 'out there', immersed in it all. What are we doing there? What helps us to live Christianly, without assuming we should be permanently set against our society, or constantly trying to convert people, or permanently guilt-ridden that we're not doing those things Monday to Saturday?

Pope John Paul II once said something that struck me as being profoundly true, and a very helpful picture of what it means to live faithfully in the world:

'There is a need for heralds of the Gospel who are experts in humanity, who have a profound knowledge of the heart of present-day men and women, participating in their joys and hopes, anguish and sadness, and who are at the same time contemplatives in love with God.

I think he was suggesting that there's something spiritually *necessary* about being to some degree immersed in your society, your culture, rather than set against it and feeling you have to resist it as a religious duty. Immersed, without getting lost in it.

Because to *also* be in love with God, in whom *alone* our restless souls can rest, is to be able to see other sources and promises of pleasure and satisfaction and delight for what they are: partial, temporary, and dangerous if they're mistaken for what can be found in God alone.

So can I offer a reflection on Lent which might not be too anti-culture? Lent is a profoundly *hopeful* season. The themes of fasting, repentance, self-denial maybe don't immediately convey that, but it is.

The word 'Lent' derives from the Old English 'lengten' – the increasing number of daylight hours as the world turn from winter to spring. And so Lent is sometimes referred to as the 'sad springtime' of the church. 'Sad' in the old sense of solemn, rather than unhappy... It holds out and focuses the possibility of renewal, of changing your life, of something quite different from being stuck in endless repetitions of the same: same mistakes, same bad choices, same destructive and compulsive behaviour. Something more like death and resurrection... It's like the whole Gospel in a nutshell: "Repent and believe the Gospel". These are the words for the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday. And they're the words of Jesus after facing temptation in the Judean desert.

We're used to saying God is love, is merciful. But God also does not let us get away with anything less than the truth (mercy doesn't mean 'oh it doesn't matter, forgive and forget). God will sit with us while we face and come to terms with the truth of who we are and what we've made ourselves. And that coming to terms with the truth of ourselves is very close to what we mean by repentance... Its meaning is completed in the good news that we aren't left in thrall to what we've made ourselves. To repent *also* means to 'turn around': to turn towards the one who can take remake us – it's to trust in Christ.

And that turning is possible again and again and again, because in Christ we meet the inexhaustible mercy of God, who will make a home with us and in us, and make us new. And that happens – often – in spite of us, over a lifetime; in ways, and at a pace, we will mostly scarcely recognise.

All that's asked of us is the willingness to let God do his work in us. And really, that's all a Lenten discipline – or indeed *any* Christian practice (prayer, confession, giving, forgiveness, fasting, worship) - is about, in the end: allowing God to 'get at us'. Lowering the defences. Getting my self out of the way.

James Kushiner said 'A discipline won't bring you closer to God. Only God can bring you closer to himself. What the discipline is meant to do is to help you get yourself, your ego, out of the way so you are open to His grace.'

If God helps us face the truth, then the *opposite* of truth is fiction. Or illusion. The things we use to shore up the fictional stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what we've made ourselves. They're often our most cherished images of ourselves... And a Lenten discipline can be a way of releasing our grip on those illusions.

If the *opposite* of truth is fiction, then the *enemy* of truth is distractions. What distracts you? What stops you facing difficult truths and asking God's grace to help you change?

What are you *really* addicted to? It may be the predictable Lenten things we give up: alcohol, overeating. Or it may be something else. Overworking? Social media? News?

Malcolm Muggeridge said of Mother Teresa that she was someone who never watched the news or opened a newspaper, and hence was someone who was acutely aware of what was going on...

If we're all permanently over-stimulated, what might it mean to simplify your life? What about a fast from over-stimulation? Turn the mobile off for a couple of hours a day? A whole day..? Can you imagine doing that? If not, why not – honestly?

Only look at your emails once a day, deal with them and then turn your email off? Do without Radio 4 for Lent, or one day a week (sorry, I should say there are other radio stations available; but I'm looking around and mostly I'm thinking 'Radio 4')

What face does temptation wear for you? Cynicism? Despair? Conflict-avoidance? Control? What kind of a keeping of Lent might help you resist your temptations?

It's maybe no surprise that the pre-election pastoral letter of the House of Bishops was published in the week that Lent began... The call there is *also* for renewal: of a social and

political vision that dis-places the self, and self-interest, as the final motivation for how we vote, and how politicians treat us and address us.

The Christian vision is a social vision, not just for the church, but for the whole of humanity. We can never seek to impose it – that would be theocracy, and has never been a mainstream Christian goal.

But Christianity has something to contribute to society's shared conversation about human living, its goals, and the common good – whatever the more reactionary secularists might say. If we restrict our vision for human living just to the shared life of the church, we're also, by implication, restricting the creative, sustaining and redeeming work of God to the church, and seeing the world in terms not of God's presence, but God's absence. That simply doesn't work theologically. It's simply not defensible to limit God's presence to where the church is, and God's acting to where and how the church acts.

I suspect it's a while since you heard anyone describe Christians as hard-headed realists.

But that's something of what we bring to the shared conversation about how we shape society and its institutions and practices... I've bored you with eschatology before, haven't I? The doctrine of the last things: the final redemption of creation in Christ, the restoration of all things – which is in God's hands, not ours.

The Christian eschatological perspective should make us profoundly realistic about any purely human project of renewal, of happiness and human flourishing. Not that our shared social efforts are wasted, or can't make a contribution to those things. It's just that they will always be incomplete, partial – never perfect. For the Christian, there's no such thing as utopia, 'the answer', the elusive formula that resolves the political question about how we live together.

So, for example, the most cherished and well-designed projects of inclusion will ignore, or create, other marginalised groups. The Christian won't despair, but will be alive to and prepared for that reality, and the continuing work it asks of us.

New and idealistic political movements can run up against compromise, or into the sand; let their constituents and members down, lose touch with the grassroots... And a Christian shouldn't therefore give up on politics; just not expect perfection, or the fixing of everything...

The degrees of imperfection in any human project aiming at the good doesn't mean it's useless. And the flawed and imperfect nature of our culture, or human projects of hope and striving for good or joy, doesn't mean God is wholly absent from it.

So how would it be, this Lent, to pursue and nurture signs of hope and renewal and change – at work, at home, in your street, in a relationship, in politics. Not naively, in a Pollyannaish way, but as a discipline of resisting the temptation of cynicism or despair.

So how might it be this Lent, if you encounter a genuine attempt to make things better, or less stressful, or kinder or more humane, to resist the temptations of cynicism that make you want to roll your eyes or sink down in your seat assuming it won't work, just like the last attempt didn't work. It won't be perfect. It might work. It might not. It might work for a while then run into the sand.

George Monbiot has written about the toxic label of 'hypocrite' in public life. Those who raise their heads above the parapet of public life, in words or actions, trying to effect change for good in the world, but don't consistently practice what they advocate in every single area of their lives, are accused of hypocrisy. Monbiot's point is that firstly, that we're all hypocrites, then. Second, that it's a toxic tendency because it discourages people from acting to change things for the better. And finally, that he'd rather be a hypocrite than a cynic.

Either life is an endless procession of more of the same – same mistakes, same bad decisions, same destructive patterns – or change and renewal are possible – even in small, slow, imperfect and incomplete ways in this world, because the God who will finally renew all things is not absent, but present, in the world – and in you.