

On Not Giving Up Too Easily: Thoughts for Ash Wednesday

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If your thoughts as you prepare to begin Lent are of what you plan to give up and of how much you will suffer without chocolate or alcohol during the next six weeks, perhaps it is time to realign your approach to the season. Will your chosen Lenten observance help you to grow as you journey towards Easter? Philip Endean SJ wants to remind us that ‘this great season of grace’ is not a time for constriction: ‘Lent is only Christian if it is positive.’

Before I was ordained, I worked for a year in a [primary school in Mexico City](#). On Ash Wednesday morning, I arrived on the site at 7.30 am, as usual. Three things became quickly clear. Firstly, the headmistress had forgotten to engage a priest for the day. Secondly, absolutely nothing could happen within the culture of that school on Ash Wednesday before ashes had been duly distributed to all and sundry. Thirdly, in default of a proper *padrecito*, the foreign seminarian was going to have to step in.

Thus, through a distorting microphone in the school yard, I found myself improvising a catechetical dialogue: imagine [Joyce Grenfell](#) in bad Mexican Spanish. ‘Now, children. I’m going to make the sign of the cross on all your foreheads. We use a cross because someone died on it. Does anyone know who died on the cross?’ It was a deliberately easy question, expecting the answer ‘Jesus’. In fact, eight hundred children answered back with impressive volume and unanimity ‘*Dios*’ – God. I was taken aback by the theological robustness here, but I pressed on with my lesson plan regardless. ‘And what did *Dios* do after he died?’ Silence. Pedagogical failure. All I could do was tell them the ‘right answer’ piously, and hurry on to the real ritual business.

'God died': end of story. Behind those children's response lay an inheritance of long suffering and oppression, something to be revered, not patronised. Nevertheless, there is also cause for concern here. The Acts of the Apostles tells us of disciples who had never heard of the Holy Spirit (19:1-2); here we have Christians with no knowledge of Easter. If anything like this explains why Mass on Ash Wednesday, despite the lack of 'obligation', is generally one of the most crowded celebrations in any Catholic church's year, then the situation is quite worrying.

Jesus's claims to be God, of one being with the Father who made heaven and earth, cannot rest simply on the fact that he lived nobly, for a worthy cause, and died as a result. That much is true of lots of other people too – from Socrates in antiquity to the firemen who gave their lives on the morning of 9/11. Our big stories about Jesus being one with God depend on the fact that he, and he alone, rose from the dead, and was seen by the very disciples who had failed him. We proclaim his death precisely because it was not the end. He also rose, and he will come again. Lent is the preparation for Easter: the celebration of new life, not of God's death.

Lent thus cannot be a time for wallowing in the negative. [The English word 'Lent' comes from the same root as 'length'](#). Lent, the time of spring's first stirrings, is a time for our being lengthened. We are to grow into the full stature of Christ, to move nearer the kingdom prepared for us before the world's foundation. It may be very noble, and may meet some psychological need within ourselves, to think about Lent as our trying hard, as our effort. But when we think that way, the focus is probably on ourselves. What Lent is really about is opening ourselves to someone else, about stretching ourselves, so that we can *receive* the gift of new life coming from God alone.

Many churches in these days will sing the hymn that begins:

Forty days and forty nights
Thou wast fasting in the wild;
Forty days and forty nights
Tempted, and yet undefiled.

Think of Jesus, hungry and tempted, and the next step seems just obvious:

Should not we Thy sorrow share
And from worldly joys abstain,
Fasting with unceasing prayer,
Strong with Thee to suffer pain?

Well, maybe. But by the time we get to this stage in that hymn, I normally feel pretty uneasy. Those well-crafted lines make the whole business sound so heroic, so stiff upper lip, what the British Empire was built on. If we resist our temptations to chocolate or alcohol, we somehow gain merit, and rise above mere sensuality.

But this way of thinking does not have much to do with the gospel. When Matthew and Luke in their different ways name the temptations Jesus faces, it seems as though Jesus himself is growing into, being stretched towards, the full reality of his mission. He has to recognise that his way is not that of simple miracle-working, despite the triumphs with which his career in the gospel seems to open. He has to realise that his kingdom is a kingdom in the truest sense, a kingdom given from above, and therefore not of this world (John 18: 36-37). Jesus is not proving his moral fibre, but growing in his sense of his own identity.

This piece could almost be called 'On Not Giving Up For Lent'. Almost, but not quite. What is important is that we avoid superstitious practices that are at best mere window-dressing, and at worst thoroughly destructive, reflecting the styles of religion from which Jesus came to free us. The real point is about the mindset we bring to Lent. I am trying to insist that Lent is 'this great season of grace', God's gift to the

Church – to use the words of [the Missal when it was still in native English](#). Lent places us before the author and pioneer of our faith, Jesus Christ, and asks us how we might follow him more deeply. Lent is only Christian if it is positive.

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius Loyola in various ways encourages us to pray, not out of our conventional selves, or with the skills we have already developed, but rather from the parts of ourselves that are being ‘shaken up by different spirits’ (Exx 6). We need to be in touch with what can transform us, what makes us confront new questions, what stretches our commitment and identity. It is that kind of focus that should characterise Lent. Where am I growing? Where are there questions in my life? Where am I being called to something deeper – something which, precisely as such, I cannot get my head round? What is my equivalent of the desert, of Jesus’s temptations? How can I enter into that place fully, freely, generously?

Now, such questions may well still give us the normal answers. Lay off the sugar or the cigarettes or the meat – not because the enjoyment I get from such things is bad in itself, but because the pleasure they give may be dulling my awareness of the tough issues that really matter. And though no-one can live at full spiritual stretch all the time, it is good for us to have a designated six weeks every year when we try more intensively to open ourselves to God’s stretching. We should not be too ambitious; if we are, we’ll almost certainly fail, get discouraged, and give up some time round the first Sunday. We need realistic targets: enough to stretch us, not so much as to crush us. We need to go slowly, to seek sustainable growth.

When such considerations inform our indulgence in standard Lenten penance, well and good. But we can also be creative, and develop practices that are less conventionally ‘penitential’. Some of us might need to give up some element of our religion. Some of us may need to sleep more. Some of us, particularly if we are given to the single or celibate life, may need to work more deeply at our relationships, and stop avoiding the all too challenging ways in which they alone can stretch us.

Lent is for lengthening, not for constriction. As we begin the forty days, we need to ask the Spirit where we are being called, here and now, to grow. We need to ask ourselves what we must do in order to further that divine purpose. We need to stop confining ourselves, and instead be open to the one who calls light out of darkness, brings life out of death. It is not really about our effort, still less about our looking miserable. Rather, with humble pride, we boast that all we can do is to plant and to water. The real growth, the true lengthening, comes from God (1 Corinthians 3:5-7).

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