

LENT IS THE CALL TO LIVE OUR LIVES ANEW

“Lent is a time for trimming our soul and scrapping the sludge off a life turned slipshod. Lent is about taking stock of time, even religious time. Exercising the control that enables us to say no to ourselves so that when life turns hard of its own accord, we have the stamina to say yes to its twists and turns with faith and hope. Lent is the time to make new efforts to be what we say we want to be”. (Joan Chittister)

For Christians, Ash Wednesday signals the beginning of the Lenten season – the season we associate with ‘penance’. But there is a certain danger behind that definition! If practicing penance is all that Lent is primarily about, it merely trivializes the true meaning. It reduces the spiritual life to some kind of balancing act: Maybe we think that by doing so many penances in lieu of our human sinfulness - voila, we have then cleared our debts!

Unfortunately, the Lenten season can become filled with overly scrupulous goals. Yet, we don’t need to try and change everything about our relationship with God in forty days. In focusing on prayer and fasting to such an extreme, we may possibly forget the purpose of doing so could become a stumbling block to attaining our spiritual goals. No, Lent is a time to focus on Christ and his sacrifice, to focus on his immense love for us, and to focus on uniting ourselves with Christ more deeply.

So, finding a balanced way of strengthening our relationship with Jesus this Lent is most important. It is a time to work not only on our personal spiritual growth, but it is also time to ensure that our spiritual growth is bearing fruit.

As Joan Chittister so beautifully writes: ‘Lent is a call for what we could have been and are not. Lent is the grace to grieve for what we should have done and did not. Lent is also a call to weep for what we could have been but failed to be; the grace to repent for what we should have done, but failed to do.’

Every Lent offers us a fresh opportunity to meditate on the life of Jesus right up to his final moments - his ultimate passion, death and resurrection. Alternatively, we could just as easily travel this Lenten journey without letting its roots grow deep within us. However, come Easter, we would, once again, simply have gone through the motions!

Perhaps, this Lent we can take a different approach. We can try to be more mindful of Jesus as He journeys the final stage of his life towards the Cross. For us too, Lent is a journey from life to death, from light to darkness. And yet, conversely, it is also a journey from death to life, from darkness to light! The Lenten Gospels share many stories of Jesus’ encounters with those who have lost all hope, yet come to find their lives transformed as they accept the message and healings of Jesus, their Saviour.

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Traditionally, Lent has always been not only a time of prayer, fasting and repentance, but also as a special time set aside from the busyness of our lives to enable us to come closer to God. A time of preparing for Easter similarly as Advent helps us prepare for Christmas. I know it helps refocus this special season for me. I no longer merely regard the practice of 'giving up' something as part of an old tradition, but also as an opportunity to spend more time in the silence and presence of God, of sharing the joy and anticipation of the triumph of Jesus' Resurrection at Easter.

From past experiences, I know it won't be easy to make the time but here in lies the lesson: Lent is the time to 'give up' making excuses. The time to stop saying 'No, I can't do it!' And most of all, to realize that Lent is the time to live our lives more fully, for life is a gift from God that we should embrace to the fullest.

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