

Rector's Letter - Rev'd Jeremy Trew - March 2024

Dear All

The point of Lent is not denial.

But for a long time, I thought it was. Everything I heard about Lent revolved around the acts of self-denial. It was all about what object or habit one would give up and how hard it was to deny oneself of that thing. Of course, that denial was meant to help one think about God and Christ's sacrifice, but in truth the focus was always on the act of denial itself. The question always is, "what are you giving up for Lent?" as if that is what the season is about.



On one hand it's understandable that we miss the point of Lent. In our religious traditions rituals and legalism are far easier to promote, understand, and implement than spirituality and faith. We can grasp rules. It is far easier to tell kids to obey rules than to explain to them why they should desire to act rightly. They then end up following the rules simply because the rules exist. When it comes to Lent, we often do the same – denying ourselves something for the sake of denial. We give up chocolate thinking that act of denial is the purpose of Lent. And we end up missing the point.

But Lent isn't about denial, it is about transformation. It is the season in which we prepare to encounter Christ's sacrifice by endeavouring to become more Christ like ourselves. Transformation is about letting ourselves be filled with God's presence so that we can be shaped by God's grace. Our acts of kenosis – denying ourselves in order to empty ourselves enough to allow God to fill us – are means to an end. They are disciplines that prepare us to be transformed. We deny ourselves so that we can be reborn as new creations – to live more fully as the Kingdom citizens God desires us to be.

So I am very tentative in choosing what disciplines I will follow during Lent to open myself up to God's transforming power. I've discovered that for me personally, legalistic denial for the sake of denial often achieves the opposite purpose. Giving up coffee doesn't make me a better follower of Christ; it just makes me more irritable. Such disciplines don't assist me in emptying myself in order to let God in; they simply fill me with more of me.

I've come to learn that in order to become more fully the person God wants me to be, I instead need to make sacrifices that actually allow me to achieve those ends. Often those sacrifices are less about personal denial, and more about following disciplines that encourage me to love others more. In the past I've attempted to eat more ethically or shop fairly – which of course required discipline and sacrifice on my part (and a bit of denial as well), but the outcome of these outwardly focused changes was far more personally transformative than if I had just eliminated something from my life for forty days.

So, for me the question for Lent is not “what am I giving up?” but instead “what can I do to allow God to transform me this season?” The answers to those questions might be the same for some people, for me changing the question shifted how I observed Lent. Whatever the case, I think it is important to understand what the ultimate purpose is behind why we engage in certain disciplines unless we miss their very point.

Best wishes

Jeremy

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