

Lent 1B Mark 1.9-15 **18 February 2018**

Well, Lent has begin.. those 40 days, plus Sundays, from Ash Wednesday til Easter, this time of preparation, this time of taking up practices that bring us closer to God. It is the time we push ourselves to the edge, step into the wilderness, the desert..to focus on God.

Joyce Rupp writes:

‘Jesus did not decide on his own to go into the desert. He was led by the Spirit. Jesus would probably not have chosen to go there any more than any of us would choose to enter into a time of extended struggle. Yet in those challenging forty days Jesus experienced his inner strength and found a clear direction for his future ministry. Out of that empty and hostile sojourn, Jesus came forth with “the power of the Spirit”¹ in him. I can’t imagine any of us liking our own deserts, the parts of our life we want to get rid of as fast as we can: anything that snatches us away from a contented life. We tend to think our deserts are bad places, But could it be the Spirit leads us there to know ourselves better? Could it be that our deserts are the very place where we meet our spiritual power, where our faith is strengthened and the assurance is given that we can, as Jesus did, deliberately choose for good in the face of temptation and conflict?’²

Jan Richardson goes further:

How will we see the angels if we don’t go into the wilderness? How will we recognise the help that God sends if we don’t seek out the places beyond what is comfortable to us, if we don’t press into terrain that challenges our habitual perspective? How will we find the delights that God provides even—and especially—in the desert places?³

‘The season of Lent beckons us to see what we are clinging to.. These days draw us into a wilderness in which we can more readily see what we have shaped our daily lives around: habits, practices,

¹ Luke 4: 14

² Joyce Rupp ‘Gods enduring presence’, John Garrett publishing 2008

³ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/02/23/first-sunday-of-lent-and-the-angels-waited/>

possessions, commitments, conflicts, relationships—all the stuff that we give ourselves to in a way that sometimes becomes more instinctual than intentional. Much as Jesus was driven into the desert to pray and fast for forty days, to find out who and whose he was, to discern his true calling, Lent offers us a landscape that calls us to look at our lives from a different perspective, to perceive what is essential and what is extraneous'.⁴

For centuries, the Christian tradition has given us the Lenten fast as a way to gain this perspective.

At the core of this practice is a recognition that in giving up something precious to us, we are better able to make room for God. Entering into a spiritual practice, however, always carries the risk that we will become more attached to the form of the practice than to its original intent.

Like the mayor in *Chocolat*, we may become so invested in holding to a certain structure that it insulates us from God and isolates us from other people. Lent challenges us to see and sort through what we are attached to, including our attachments to the practices themselves.⁵

The desert mothers and fathers—those ones who, in the early centuries of the church, went into the wilderness to seek God—had a keen awareness of the profits and the perils of spiritual practice. In the midst of their earnest desire for God, wise ones among them recognised how seemingly holy habits could sometimes distance them from God and each other.

Here is a story from the desert fathers:

Abba Cassian related the following: “The holy Germanus and I went to Egypt, to visit an old man. Because he offered us hospitality we asked him, ‘Why do you not keep the rule of fasting, when you receive visiting brothers, as we have received it in Palestine?’ He replied, ‘Fasting is always to hand but you I cannot have with me always. Furthermore, fasting is certainly a useful and necessary thing, but it depends on our choice while the law of God lays it upon us to do the works of charity. Thus receiving Christ in you, I ought to serve you with all diligence, but when I have taken

⁴ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/02/05/ash-wednesday/>

⁵ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/02/05/ash-wednesday/>

leave of you, I can resume the rule of fasting again. For “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, but when the bridegroom is taken from them, then they will fast in that day.”“”
(Mark 2.19-20)⁶

The monks’ host recognises that in even the most devoted spiritual life, God compels us to root out whatever habit stands in the way of the hospitality to which God calls us.

At the heart of this season is a call to remember that something gleams among the Ash Wednesday ashes. We do not cling to the ashes for the sake of ashes, nor to the wilderness, nor to the outer form of whatever practice God gives us. Lent beckons us to cling to the one who dwells within and beneath and beyond every ritual and practice and form: Christ our Light, who desires us to receive his hospitality even—and perhaps especially—among ashes.⁷

We bring our brokenness, our cracked, vulnerability to this God.

On Ash Wednesday I spoke of this broken pot. I said it would be a symbol for our journey through Lent, when we bring our brokenness and fragility to the light of Christ and allow ourselves to be tended, to be healed, yet still carrying the cracks, the places where the light shines through.

Poet, Noel Davis tells this poem, based on an Hasidic Story:

Dance of the living flame

The Potter has fashioned with great love
a beautiful earthen vessel.
It fills with Divine Love
but the love cannot be contained
and shatters the vessel into a million shards
that are strewn across the earth
each with a spark of Divine Love.

It is the destiny of each
to fan that spark into a living flame

⁶ **The Sayings of the Desert Fathers**, translated by Benedicta Ward, SLG

⁷ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/02/05/ash-wednesday/>

so that others too may catch fire.

We do this by living each day fully,
lovingly
courageously
compassionately

Entrusting ourselves to the Dance
in this season of our lives.

We come to know in our hearts all is of grace,
the outer and inner work of growing into freedom,
blooming into the fullness of ourselves with each other.

When it comes time
and a shard weathers, crumbles,
ones with the earth,
the living flame reunites
with the Ever Living Flame of Love.

'Tis the Rhythm of the Dance.

Noel Davis based on an Hasidic Story

Mother Teresa of Calcutta says: *prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at God's disposition, and listening to God's voice in the depths of our hearts.*⁸

God is the potter we are the clay..

Susanna

⁸ Catherine Spinks, *Mother Teresa, in my own words*, Harper Collins, New York, 2011