

3rd Sunday of Lent – March 8, 2015

- Our Lenten journey is now about two and a half weeks old. We still have some way to go before it is complete.
- If you are like me, this is a good thing. It means there is time left to accomplish the things that Lent is supposed to enable us to do.
- This give me hope because I have been struggling to find my direction. I have heard the encouragement about fasting, repentance and alms-giving, but I am still trying to discover what I should be trying to accomplish.
- The usual things just don't seem to work.
- Giving up drinking for Lent is probably good for my physical and mental health, but what does it do for my spiritual well-being?
- Repentance is hard because I find either too little or too much to repent.
- On the one hand, I am working as hard as I can to please people around me and seldom say 'No' to anyone.
- On the other, I am undoubtedly contributing to climate change, and although I try to reduce my global footprint by walking everywhere, there are limits if I want to get to church on time, especially on a Sunday when the time changes.
- And as the receipts for last year's charitable donations roll in, it looks as if I have done my almsgiving bit too.
- So what should I do for Lent? Where to turn?
- Today's readings might help. Much of what we do in religious worship and practice is a matter of following rules and doing what has been done before. Maybe the place to start is to think about what these rules and practices are really all about. Because, sometimes they obscure rather than advance the original intent behind them.

- The first reading gives us perhaps the best known set of rules, the 10 commandments. They were helpful for the Israelites of Moses's day, but today there are few societies that can get by with these 10.
- We have multiplied them into thousands of rules of many different sorts, ranging from legislation enacted by law-making bodies to rules of etiquette in the world of social media.
- But Jesus collapsed the rules into just two: love God and love your neighbour. It makes you wonder. If all the rules are really about loving God and your neighbour, how do they stack up against these fundamental precepts?
- Do all our laws and rules reflect these precepts, particularly many of the new ones that are being written into our law books?
- So, is Lent about following rules? I'm not sure, apart from the two that Jesus enunciated.
- The scene with Jesus in the Temple in the Gospel today provides another good example of the limits of rule-following. Although today we might wonder why people were setting up shop in a place of worship, it in fact made some sense in terms of the rules of religious worship and practice in Jesus's time.
- Observant Jews who came to the Temple were expected to bring sacrifices. Merchants selling birds and animals for sacrifice were helping them meet their religious duties, although they were also making a handsome profit.
- Money-changers were also helping since donations could not be made in Roman denarii because they bore pagan or imperial portraits. They had to be exchanged for coins from Tyre.
- So, all these business people were in the business of helping worshippers worship.
- And yet, Jesus turns them out of the temple. And then he goes further and speaks of the destruction of the Temple itself, and re-building it in 3 days.

- But of course, the re-build was not to be one of stone and mortar, it was entirely different, a Temple of Jesus's body.
- What we have in the Gospel today is a striking example of how Jesus exposes the perversion of religious worship, overturning the accessories of sacrifice and donations, and even foretells the doom of the physical space of worship, in favour of his own death and resurrection.
- Jesus's message does indeed seem foolish in overturning the tables of tradition and complacency, and suggesting that he himself will replace the temple. But it is a striking reminder that rituals and worship spaces are a means to an end, not ends in themselves.
- As Paul says in the second reading, God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is strength.
- So, how do I relate this to my own reality? Well, let's look at our Lenten practices, starting with fasting and abstinence.
- For example, is it really a hardship to give up eating meat? And what exactly is the benefit to giving it up?
- At least two benefits come to mind. First, abstinence can be linked to global sustainability, consuming food that is less resource-intensive. It is a practice that, if widespread, can have a significant impact on the demand for resources and facilitate their stewardship.
- Secondly, it can jolt me out of my complacency. If it is different from what I am used to, I notice, and in noticing perhaps engage more in Lenten reflection about the way I am living my life.
- When I move on to consider acts of charity, perhaps I need to realize that the Christmas year-end is not the only time for charitable giving, and I might be more creative in our giving, expanding my donations beyond the usual ones.

- And finally, what should I be sorry for? Following rules gives me comfort, but maybe I can think more about what motivates the rules and whether I am living their spirit as well as their letter. And when get annoyed with someone I am helping, I should not rationalize my annoyance away, but in instead work through it to remember why I am helping in the first place.
- And just maybe I can do better. Maybe we can all do better.

JMK