

There is a scene towards the end of the film *Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy and her friends - the Tin Man, Mr. Scarecrow, and Cowardly Lion - having fulfilled the various quests set before them and gained access to the Wizard, ask for their reward: a heart for the Tin Man; a brain for Scarecrow; courage for Cowardly Lion; and the way home for Dorothy. Then Dorothy's dog Toto pulls aside the curtain behind which the Wizard hides to expose a small man who is not at all like a wizard, and they discover it is all a sham. Half in anger, half in despair, Dorothy cries to the Wizard: "You are a very bad man!" To which the Wizard replies: "No my dear, I am not a bad man, I am a good man; it's just that I am not a very good wizard!" We might say this of the Church; the Church is full of good people; it's just that at times, we are not very good Christians - which is why we need Lent.

As the Ash Wednesday liturgy unfolds, we shall find that in part it was this realisation that our humanness sometimes gets in the way of our good intentions, that drew the early Church to the idea of the season of Lent. The Ash Wednesday liturgy states it well:

The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection [when] the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Saviour, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.....BCP 264

We all have need of repentance; we all need to renew our faith. Repentance means confronting our selves with the truth of our inward parts, our own inadequacies. For some people this may lead to a deeper, more disturbing thought: will God love me as I really am? The answer, of course, is “yes.” But if Lent is the season when the church encourages people to either give something up, or take something on, it seems to me that sometimes it is enough to come to the awareness that if we believe God loves our enemies, God also loves us. Believing in God means more than just being bearers of God’s grace, it means being willing recipients of it also. For it is only through living into our full God given humanness, that we experience true resurrection, true transfiguration. To live into our full humanness means being open to the restorative grace God grants us, whether it be a new heart, a new mind or outlook on life, or simply courage to be ourselves. This is what renewal means.

The penitential Psalm 51, which lies at the heart of the Ash Wednesday liturgy, is central to the season of Lent, for it speaks of repentance:

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your
loving-kindness; *
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
Wash me through and through from my wickedness *
and cleanse me from my sin.*

*For I know my transgressions, *
and my sin is ever before me.*

Yet Psalm 51 also speaks of renewal; it is a psalm of restoration, calling us back from that in which we have erred, calling us back to the ever enfolding arms of a God who loves us; to God's grace that is ever before us.

*Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; *
wash me, and I shall be clean indeed.*

*Create in me a clean heart, O God, *
and renew a right spirit within me.*

*Give me the joy of your saving help again *
and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.*

Here is restoration; here is renewal; here is the meaning of the season of Lent.

When I was “nobut a lad” as we say in Yorkshire, I had an urge to join the Air Cadets. There came a time when I was inducted into the local squadron and received my uniform. I cut quite a dashing figure in my air force blue with the Royal Air Force insignia on my beret: an eagle with the Latin motto: *Per ardua ad astra* “Through struggles to the stars” But it was not long before the novelty wore off and my friends and I stopped going to the squadron meetings.

In time we were called in front of the Squadron Leader, a man who when only a few years older than we were, had flown in the Battle of Britain. We had all our excuses down pat, he cut straight to the quick. He talked to us about sacrifice and duty; he knew all our excuses before we could tell them; he talked about forgiveness; then quietly encouraged us to start again. Now, sixty years on, I have never forgotten that encounter, it seems to me to get at the heart of Lent.

Confession, they say, is good for the soul, but difficult for most of us, for true confession touches the very heart of our being. Yet, at the heart of Psalm 51 is the confession, because it must be done for the good of the soul; we cannot move through Lent without confession. And when it comes to forgiveness, do not think only of people you have forgiven; think of those people from whom you have experienced forgiveness; think of those people you should forgive. That also is the meaning of Lent.

However you choose to approach Lent: through the lens of the Prophet Joel, in fear and trembling; or through the lens of Paul, as being an acceptable time to take on a new discipline. Whether you look at Lent through the pious lens of the gospel writer Matthew, or through the lens of penitential Psalm

51, think of it as the season when God draws aside the curtain to our true selves; an invitation to pardon and amendment of life; a season of forgiveness, restoration and renewal.

And don't overlook that fact that for all its somber tones, the season of Lent is really a season of quiet proclamation, of Good News: *Open my lips, O Lord, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.* For God has already granted us a new heart; a new mind; and the courage to be our selves. God has already shown us the way home: *Per ardua ad astra* to struggle to the stars, and the strength to go there. I pray you a Holy Lent. Amen

Preached on Ash Wednesday 2020
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