

A Physical & Spiritual Lent

Our Churches Together Lent Group this year will be focussing on the Sacraments. Writing for next month's Outlook, I was thinking about a wider category of what is sacramental in our lives; where physical things or actions possess or convey spiritual meaning.

There is an essential physical dimension to two of the three spiritual disciplines to which Jesus refers in today's Ash Wednesday Gospel reading: giving alms is about what we choose to do with our material assets; while fasting is abstinence from physical consumption. Our physical choices within a Lenten disciple – or, more generally, in a rule of life – have a spiritual meaning and purpose.

Conversely, a spiritual life which lacks physical expression or congruence is questionable. Through Isaiah, the Lord rebukes his people that their spiritual fasting is completely at odds with the way they conduct their lives: quarrelling and fighting among themselves and exploiting or ignoring those who are worse off.

Lent begins symbolically with ashing: not an official sacrament; but still a symbolic act with a physical substance: palm ash. This sterile, waste material invites us to ground ourselves: to recognise our shortcomings and wasted opportunities; a base from which we can ask God to help us start over again.

I wonder what physical disciplines might be most congruent for me or you in this day and age? It's clear Jesus was talking to an audience for whom fasting was normal – *when you fast*, not *if you fast* – and attracted approval – hence his injunction not to make a show of it. But in our time, other than dieting, voluntarily doing without something is counter-cultural. In a consumer age, the expectation is that anything will be available, all of the time, to those who want it and can afford it – and the aspiration is to be able to afford it. Think about vegetables in the supermarket: if they are out of season here we'll fly them in from Africa. At the same time, we know that our planet cannot sustain the load we are putting upon it. Wouldn't a significant reduction in the unsustainable aspects of our lifestyles be the kind of fast that God would choose? For me, using less petrol (so walking, car sharing, public transport); eating less meat; avoiding disposables and over-packaging. And maybe, because it's counter cultural, reversing Jesus' teaching: being more open about doing it? Not because we want to boast, but because we need many more people to embark on this journey too.

I do think Jesus' teaching on almsgiving has a new relevance in our day. Fundraising has got very noisy and public of late. But regular, quiet, meaningful giving is something charities depend upon – and without the expense for them of staging an eye-catching campaign. A wider interpretation of almsgiving will include the lending of our time and talents: I hardly need to convince a church congregation about the value of volunteering our services (something undergoing a worrying decline at the moment). I don't think I'd thought about it as a spiritual discipline until it appeared in the suggested framework for a rule of life I was given as part of my vocation process. But there is a spiritual dimension to our making a physical input into some aspect of the life of the local community. But maybe there is an aspect where I, at least, could do more: I'm not good at responding to public consultations or appeals to lend my voice to a campaign; to let our political representatives, or others, know how I feel about a matter. The danger is that if we don't express a view, it may be assumed that we feel differently: that we don't object, or don't care. A vote in a ballot box every few years is a minimal and rather ambiguous contribution to the shaping of our society.

The spiritual purpose of our physical Lenten disciplines are to bring us closer to God, as we accompany Jesus in the deprivations of his journey to the cross and acknowledge our contribution to the sin of the world which put him there. Lent has sacramental origins as the time of preparation for those who were to receive baptism at Easter (or, as penitents, to be reconciled to the Christian community from which they had temporarily been excluded). We may be invited to renew our baptismal vows as part of the Church's Easter celebrations, prior to breaking bread with our risen Lord.

In a sinful world, baptism's spiritual rebirth goes hand in hand with physical transformation: through the water we enter God's new creation in Jesus Christ. If we find that through Lent we have acquired some new, healthy, physical disciplines, then something more of the risen life of Christ will have been made real within us.