

Monastic Scribe XLVI: March 3, 2023

LENT FOR ADULTS

We are in the middle of Lent now – forty days renewal lived along with billions of Christians throughout the world. But does it matter? Children are indoctrinated into Lent by learning self-denial, learning how to give something up, to deprive themselves so they can offer God all that they have, so they may learn to be like Jesus Christ who gave of himself completely. Hopefully they learn that God gave himself out of love for them, that God loves each one of them.

The way of Lent for a child is rather simple. Why is it no longer simple for an adult? Perhaps some adults try to keep the ways of a child, give something up, learn what penance is all about. Most of us lose the innocent way of such penance. Life has become grayer, rather than our previous black and white way of living. Things seem to be more complicated. Faith is now more demanding and we doubt whether we have that faith anymore.

I read recently of a woman who has left the church because it is corrupt and that she has lost her faith. Yes, the church is corrupt as is our country and many institutions. But exactly what faith did she lose? Our faith has to encounter doubt, uncertainty, confusion. A childlike belief in God will not sustain us (though we hopefully come back to that “second naivete” later in life!).

The history of Lent may help direct our Lenten practices. There are two lines of development of this season. The first line was a season of penance for public sinners. Those who had committed such sins as murder, adultery, apostasy were consigned to do penance and not attend Mass with the community for forty days. Note, that this practice ante-dated the history of private confession and anamchara relationships developed by Irish monks. Those doing penance were publicly reconciled on Holy Thursday, the beginning of the Easter feast.

The second strand of development was a period of preparation for baptism at the Easter Vigil. Our RCIA program, patterned on this practice, today is usually a year of preparation. On Lenten Sundays the candidates for baptism attend the Liturgy of the Word and are dismissed for their own discussion during the Liturgy of the Eucharist. It is then during the Easter season of fifty days that the newly baptized and all Christians attended Mass and received communion (not during Lent). We can learn something for ourselves by noting that both these historical strands were to take place within a communal setting.

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Baptism, as Christian life in general, is not a matter between God and me but something I share with the community. Lent is a time of communal renewal. We may take more time to be silent by ourselves to pray but it is in awareness of our oneness with others. In Lent we pray for the church and all people. And more significantly, we do penance for the sins of the church, as well as for terrorists, warmakers, for crooked politicians. These are all our brothers and sisters. Lent makes us more aware of our unity with saints and sinners, the good and the bad. We, as church, are united in this time to reflect on Jesus and his call to discipleship and atone for our lack of faithfulness.

The first step in following Christ is to know and own our own faults. We may not have great faults ourselves but, again, we are in union with others. Conscious or not, we have absorbed communal sinfulness in racism, anti-Semitism, greed, materialism, misogyny, violent ways of thinking, speaking and acting. Bringing to consciousness our own complicity in the sin of the world is not to indulge in guilt or shame. God loves us as we are, sins and all. Don't waste time in self-deprecation. Own and acknowledge that parts of our lives have been touched by sin and now we open ourselves to God's merciful love and healing.

The wonderful thing of Lent is that we are doing all this together with Christians throughout the world. We are not alone as we reflect, name and ask forgiveness for our own sins and the sins of the world. Lent gives us the incentive to slow down, be less busy, turn off the distractions, listen to God's Word, and grow in God's love, freedom, and compassion. Join me in the joy of such an opportunity. Together let us, as Saint Benedict says, look forward to Easter with spiritual longing. I pray for you and ask you to pray for me. You can contact me at: joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.