

Paul's Clergy comment: Lent 'Inner and Outer Work'

If somebody were to ask you, what would you say were your good habits, and what would you say were your bad habits? I went through a phase for a number of years when I bit my nails quite a lot, before I finally managed to break the habit. Rather like when learning to drive a car or playing a musical instrument, once you get into a bad habit, it can be very difficult to get out of it again, because it becomes ingrained. On the flip side, getting into good habits can have long-term value. One of the criticisms often levelled at the Christian observance of Lent is that it lasts for a few weeks, but has no real impact on the rest of the year – we don't drink alcohol or eat chocolate for a few weeks, but what real lasting good does that do, one wonders?

Perhaps one of the things that the season of Lent can be about, then, is establishing good habits in our life of faith that will benefit us the whole year round. Perhaps the primary good habit that we can establish, or re-establish in Lent, is the habit of nurturing the kind of relationship with God that was central to Jesus' life and ministry and is central to ours as Christians. What the New Testament calls eternal life is to be found deep within us in that invisible relationship with God that is the greatest treasure that you and I will ever have.

If we read through the accounts of Jesus' teaching in the four Gospels, we notice how much emphasis he places upon the inner life. He constantly takes his hearers back behind their outer actions to their inner life and intentions from which their actions spring. You and I come to church, to the physical building. This is good and right. Yet each one of us also has within us a chapel in our own hearts where we can meet with God, where he waits for us, longing to meet us, to immerse us in his love, to calm our fears to heal our wounds and to strengthen us for our daily lives. Anthony Bloom writes "The Kingdom of God is within us first of all. If we cannot find the Kingdom within us, if we cannot meet God in the very depths of ourselves, our chances of meeting him outside are very remote". How regularly do we visit that place of eternal life through quiet prayer and reflection?

In that sense, the path to holiness must be at one level a personal thing. There is no standard box - one size fits all - called "holiness". I can learn from the example of others, true, but the journey into holiness leads to greater rather than less uniqueness. To quote the Hindu Proverb, "True greatness is not about being better than someone else; true greatness is about being better than you were before".

But neither can it stop there. Jesus' time in the wilderness was a time of solitary introspection and preparation for a ministry that would change the world. Our ambitions may be a little more modest. Yet our inner work must find outward expression. Over recent years, there has been a tendency to move away from an understanding of Lent that focuses upon individual self-denial or self-discipline towards what is often referred to as a more "positive" view of Lent. People don't give things up for Lent any longer; they take things up for Lent. Perhaps rightly there has been a reaction against what have sometimes been rather individualistic or even self-centred approaches to Lent at the expense of other aspects of the season. "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free?" writes the prophet Isaiah. The path to holiness must at some point connect with the welfare of our neighbour, as our new parish Amnesty group reminds us

Sitting alone in the wilderness Jesus refused to escape from the reality of himself and his situation. What will that imply for you and me this Lent? If such "inner work" was unavoidable for him as a springboard to his ministry, it must be unavoidable for you and me in our work as Christian people too. What will it mean for you to stay with the reality of your life and situation, and face it honestly in the knowledge of God's overwhelming love for you? What temptations and escape routes will you need to avoid as you undertake your "inner work" this Lent? If we do this work seriously and well, it will, it should, be a springboard not only to renewed relationship with ourselves, but also to renewed relationship and service to God and our neighbour.

Paul