

What Is Lent, Really?

‘Lent is not about giving things up.’ How many times have I heard something like that, from the pulpits of churches in various countries in the world!

Wrong. Lent is about self-discipline. It’s about looking within ourselves and asking, ‘What in my life—my habitual actions and judgements, my attitudes, my knee-jerk reactions to other people, my relationship with God—is less than Jesus desires for me?’ and then *doing* something about that.

Put that way, there’s a partial truth in saying ‘Lent is not about giving things up’. Partial truths, by definition, contain a grain of truth. Often, however, they betray *the* truth precisely by being partial. That’s why witnesses in court are charged with swearing that they will tell the *whole* truth. The partial truth is that Lent is not solely about giving things up (especially if what you give up is relatively trivial, like chocolate biscuits) because once you’ve identified where you need to change, it might not be a matter of renouncing something for a short while. It might be a matter of taking something on. The whole truth is that Lent is about growth, and growth either requires some sort of renunciation, some form of moral or spiritual pruning— if not of some thing, then of time or well-worn habits—or some form of addition, like planting seeds that spring up to new life—but quite possibly, both.

The core of Lent is new life. Our word ‘Lent’ derives from an Old English word, *lencten*, meaning ‘spring’ and the related word, *Lenz*, is one of the two modern German words for the season of spring. Part of the reason for the association of the liturgical season of Lent with the botanical season of spring is that in the northern hemisphere, Lent falls in spring. This coincidence is no pagan hangover as far as the church is concerned, though. In the southern hemisphere, where March, April and May fall in autumn, the church’s Lent is still about spiritual rejuvenation.

How does new life come about? Sometimes through some form of death, as Jesus reminds us, ‘Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit’ (Jn 12.24). Sometimes through labour, such as ploughing, planting, weeding, or by the pain and toil that lead to physical birth. Sometimes it comes about through a resolute decision to make a major change in one’s life, such as turning from addiction or acquiring new eating habits or starting a fitness program. Sometimes, of course, change seems to come about effortlessly, as when weeds spring up from nowhere, apparently unaided—but that rarely happens in the case of the spiritual lives of human beings. We, it seems, are destined to effect change through self-dedication and effort—and both self-dedication and effort require self-discipline.

Self-discipline was termed in the early church *askesis*, from which modern English derives *ascetical*, a word many speakers of English associate with self-harm, such as beating or starving yourself. The core meaning of *askesis*, however, is just ‘discipline’. When you steer your eating habits toward nutritious food rather than junk, you are exercising discipline but rather than harming, you *benefit* yourself. When you renounce the TV for half an hour to read the Bible and pray, you are *benefiting* yourself by creating space for God to fill your mind and heart, rather than entrusting this task to some glib TV scriptwriter or greedy advertiser.

God’s will for each of us is that we be holy—nothing less. However our way of being holy is unique to each of us. Secular wisdom often seems to suggest that holiness is boring: saints are all the same, a bunch of killjoys who don’t like to eat or drink and can’t stand a joke or enjoy a party. *Wrong.* It’s the opposite that is true. Sneering people sneer at different things, but there is a sameness about their inability to appreciate, even if the object of their disdain differs. (As one of

Oscar Wilde's characters once said, a cynic is someone who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.) People who let themselves become engulfed in anger may get provoked by different things, but one unhinged, raging person uncannily resembles another. And as for one drunk

Holiness is different. When you read stories of the great saints of old, some were teachers and missionaries, the apostle Paul, for example. Some were soldiers, like Ignatius of Loyola. Some were 'athletes of prayer', like Teresa of Ávila or Julian of Norwich. Some were dazzling intellects, such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Others were notable for their service to those who suffer, Elizabeth of Hungary, Mother Teresa or William Wilberforce, for instance. Some were visionaries, like the prophet Ezekiel or John the Divine. Some served God and the church by their hours of silence, like John the Hesychast, and others by eloquence, like Billy Graham or John Chrysostom (whose second name is a nickname meaning 'golden-mouthed'). John the Baptist lived on insects he found in the wilderness, while Brother Lawrence cooked for a crowd. These are all rather different personalities and God made use of their very diversity to build up the church and provide it with examples of different kinds of holiness for all the faithful—so for you and me.

For all that these men and women are luminous exemplars, none of them is meant to be a pattern that any of us follows meticulously, the way you might follow the instructions for building a model airplane or baking a cake. The saints of old should inspire us, but we aren't meant to be reproductions of them, because *each one of us is meant to be holy in a way no one else has been holy before or will be holy from now on*. If you decline God's invitation to grow in holiness, the church and the world will be missing one more saint that God intended it to have, and no one—no one—can ever take the place God desired to be yours. You are the only person who can be that particular saint. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to become that saint.

To help us grow into the unique vessel of saintliness each one of us is meant to be, Holy Mother Church provides us every year with Lent, a time for self-examination, study, prayer and self-discipline. Lent poses one big question to each of us: what in my life is keeping me from holiness? Holiness, note, not mediocrity. God is not inviting you to a jolly party of also-rans, all cosy in their banality. One way or another, there will be no mediocrities in heaven—and life on this earth is boot camp for heaven.

Be bold: ask yourself the question, 'What exactly is stopping me from being a saint?' Examine what you *do* that is less than holy and what you *don't do* that keeps you mediocre, mediocre in the way someone who never practises piano is doomed to be a mediocre pianist or someone who rarely exercises will always remain a mediocre athlete. The discipline of Lent could for you consist in trying to avoid the things that keep you from God *or* trying to acquire some of the habits that help you to grow towards God *or* both. All require discipline, the concerted effort to follow Christ, whether by pruning or planting, but in any case, by listening to the voice of the Spirit calling you to nothing less than a life in union with the Holy Trinity, and following where that voice leads you.

'I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life' (Dt 30.19).

'[Jesus] said to them, "Follow me" Immediately they left their nets and followed him' (Mt 4.19-20).

'Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin' (Rm 14.23).

'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars' Oscar Wilde.

