

316 Lent – negative or positive?

At church on the first Sunday in Lent, I suddenly realised I'd missed the fact that it *was* Lent! Then I thought: 'What's Lent for, anyway?!' so I asked Wikipedia:

The purpose of Lent is the preparation of the believer for Easter through prayer, mortifying the flesh, repentance of sins, almsgiving, simple living, and self-denial.

I read further, 'Prior to the 6th century, Lent was normatively observed through fasting, with the allowance of a vegetarian meal after sunset.' Like Ramadan! Wikipedia again:

Ramadan is a time of spiritual reflection, self-improvement, and heightened devotion and worship ... In addition to abstaining from eating and drinking during this time, Muslims abstain from sexual relations and sinful speech and behaviour.

Interesting, but reading the Lent article made me feel quite negative about the whole thing, especially 'mortifying the flesh and repentance of sins'. Don't we do enough repenting of our sins throughout the rest of the year? Doesn't every single service include focusing on our sin and seeking forgiveness, yet again?! Sure, I can be selfish, lazy and self-indulgent with the best of them, but am I unrealistic in not seeing my manifold sins and wickedness?

I am encouraged though that, in the past few years, I've heard more Christians saying that they are using Lent to *take up* something positive, perhaps spending more time with God. Couldn't we make it more a time to 'repent', yes, but in the original *metanoia* sense: turning back to God, i.e. focusing more on God and less on me?

What is Lent, anyway? (Historians, does Ramadan have similar origins, perhaps?) It's about Jesus' time in the wilderness, so what was that about? Jesus was tempted to think about his *own* food, his *own* status, and seeing the world as *his* possession. Instead, he focused on playing his part in God's great positive plan to bring God's kingdom to earth.

In so much of my thinking, I keep coming back to the Lord's prayer. It starts with God, it starts with the kingdom, and it talks about OUR daily bread, then it seeks forgiveness for OUR sins. But I think Christianity has become horribly 'self'-centred: about me and my salvation. We're supposed to be here to build God's kingdom, so maybe that's what we should be concentrating on during Lent, rather than endless introspection?!

Sorry, if I've slipped into grumpy old man mode, but imagine what schools and colleges would be like if educationalists focused, as much as we do, on the negatives of personal failings! (My Tim, an educational consultant, seems to focus a lot on team-building.)

Yes, we have to recognise that the world is in a mess (caused by *our* sin), but let's be sure to remind each other what beautiful and wonderful creations we are, and how God overflows with love for us all, and how we can sort things out if we focus on working together to build God's kingdom.

Wishing you a positive Lent,

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