

B Lent 01  
1 March 2009  
RCL

### Lent A Downer?

There is a cartoon from an Episcopal calendar that is entitled “The rector responds to a complaint that Lent is a downer.” It shows a man kneeling before a priest in church. It is obviously Ash Wednesday. The priest is crossing his forehead with ashes and saying, “Remember that you are dust – but quality dust.”

I used to think Lent was a downer, too, but now I’m not so sure. I find I get a lot of comfort from Lent. True, it is that season of the church’s year when we pay a great deal of attention to sin, the rebellious, hurtful reason that led Jesus to the cross. Sin, repentance, and death – all intimately intertwined – are seldom heard in our secular discourse; they’re almost dirty words in the market place. Yet the realities they name loom large in our lives, though determinedly ignored by so many. Listen to anyone honestly talk about their life and hear how that person has been the victim or perpetrator of selfishness, indifference, betrayal, sadism. Read the financial columns and know what greed is and how destructive it always is, in spite of its secular acceptance. Read the sports section of the newspaper and learn how the noble art of honest competition is subverted into a climate of cheating, of winning at any cost, even drug-induced physical and mental breakdown. Read the news section and learn once again the depths to which human nature can descend, individually and as groups, whether nations or cities or families or religions or corporations or social classes.

The church in Lent is one of the few places where these black realities are acknowledged and named and dealt with. It’s like having the family secret finally brought out into the light and seen for what it is. Only when darkness is clearly seen, clearly acknowledged, clearly rejected, can reconstruction begin – of the soul, of the family, of the nation, of the world. Psychologists know this, but the saints have known it far longer.

So, one of the subtexts of Lent is honesty and courage – to look into the abyss and live. But there is more and better. The church looks at sin, not to wallow in it, but rather to free us from it. The message of Lent is an optimistic one, that sin has been conquered, that we are not imprisoned in our failure permanently. Sin can be repented of, guilt can be banished, life can take on a whole new and wonderful lease. But, with the help of God, we must do the hard work of knowing our sin, individual and communal, and turning away from it (what the church calls repenting). We must have the humility to ask God for help (grace), for of ourselves we fall short.

We must see our indifference and have the strength to care and to work. We must look at our lust, our greed, our anger, our fear – and have the strength to renounce our out-of-control appetites, to turn to simplicity and generosity, to give up the sense of self-righteousness, to know ourselves to be in the hands of a loving God, to trust that, because we are with God, all will be well, even in the midst of hurt, even death.

The message from God through Jesus and in Jesus is that God wants us to be free, free of all that would hold us down, limit our possibilities, keep us from the fullness that God imagined when She created us. God works tirelessly and in depth, even unto death and resurrection, to free us from our own hurtfulness. All this is more than wishful thinking or ivory-tower speculation. We see the results in the lives of saints, great and small. In the saints great with reputation we see lives that were turned around in various ways, people who learned to live into fullness and joy, even in the midst of want and sadness. Saints belong in Lent as a constant reminder of what we can become and be. There are small saints, too, the good folks in our families, our neighborhoods, our churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques, our nation, throughout the world. Their names and goodness are known to few or none, but there are millions of them, and we should take encouragement from that knowledge. These are not famous but they are every bit as saintly.

So, is Lent a downer? I suppose it could be, if we morbidly focus on negativity and failure. But if we look through negativity and failure to freedom and fulfillment, Lent can be a real upper, the corollary to the joy of Christmas, the knowledge that we are an accompanied people, that we are not alone, that God has given Himself to us unreservedly, and asked us to give ourselves to Him unreservedly. We are indeed quality folk and even our ashes are quality ashes. Amen.