

April 2011

Lent - A Season of Healing in the Desert of the Heart

Lent is now well on the way. This special time stirs something in us – a strange, unsolicited desire. There are intimations of a journey to be made, a river to be crossed, a hill to be climbed. Beyond 'giving something up for Lent' a deeper echo reminds us of a waiting desert. And something tells us that this is a dangerous place to go. We resist the call into our own mystery, our own depths. We fear further hurting by unknown demons in the barren places. We rightly suspect that our wounds are necessary. There are palaces, we read in the Jewish Zohar, whose gates open only to tears. 'In the desert of the heart let the healing fountain start.'

Lent is a waiting desert that invites us take time to be with our wounds. As Henry Nouwen wrote, we must live them through instead of thinking them through. 'It is better to feel your wounds deeply than to understand them, to let them into your silence. You need to let your wounds go down into your heart. Then you can live them through and discover that they will not destroy you. Your heart is greater than your wounds.'

Instead, we cover the hurts of our hearts with the bandages of the mind. We bury our painful emotions and think that they are dead. We forget that our presence and personalities are profoundly influenced and shaped by these underground and often violent realities. We live and act out of the invisible shadow-world that turns, silently, within us. Pain needs light. Nothing heals in the dark.

Michael Leunig writes

*When the heart is cut or cracked or broken
Do not clutch it, let the wound lie open
Let the wind from the good old sea blow in
To bathe the wound with salt and let it sting.*

The scars of Jesus, inside and out, were always there for all to see. He let Mary wash them, Thomas touch them, his mother hold them. He openly wept, openly cursed, openly blessed. He mourned losses with others, he was angry in a crowded temple, he carried his cross in public places. His was a transparent life. And it cost. He was always dying so as to achieve that state.

Nothing less will do for us.

Lent perennially pursues the goal of authenticity. The issue is not one of being sinless or perfect – but of being self-aware and integrated. Jesus had no trouble with life's failures, those lost on the margins, or locked in their bad habits. Because for them he came. It was with the hypocrites that he lost his temper. The question that Lent, the season of truth, asks is 'How much reality about yourself can you bear?' Are you aware of your ambiguous motives, your rampant ego, your inner envy, your urge to power? Most of us try to live the Christian life without ever entering those raw and searing cellars of our own unbearable darkness. This avoidance is easy, but costly. Beyond the surface habits of a passionless piety there is a fierce intensity about Lent that relentlessly examines the integrity of our innermost heart.

In *The Divine Milieu* Teilhard de Chardin describes the terror of this surrender to pure, demanding Love: 'At each step of the descent, a new person was disclosed within me of whose name I was no longer sure, and who no longer obeyed me. And when I had to stop my exploration because the path faded from beneath my steps I found a bottomless abyss at my feet and out of it came, arising from I know not where, the current I dare call my life.'

We forever endeavour to short-circuit the relentless call of Christ. We want to equate the increase in our religious behaviour during Lent with growth in holiness. There is, however, no cheap grace. We can weave the notion of Jesus' suffering and death into coats of many colours; we can sing and ritualise 'The Washing of the Feet' and 'The Seven Last Words' – but we are truly lost if we think that these rites alone will ever save our souls. Worship without sacrifice is worthless. So is ritual without painful, personal surrender. We miss the dark truth of *Tenebrae*.

In our mistaking of the outward ego for the inner essence we are unknowingly denying ourselves the possibility of any radical conversion. We need to face the awful emptiness and nothingness of our lives behind the masks and performances, even the holiest ones. How hard this is to do! 'Forging in the smithy of my soul' is how W. B. Yeats described the hard, inner work of gaining self-knowledge. 'Now that my

ladder's gone,' he wrote, 'I must lay down where all the ladders start, in the foul rag-and bone shop of the heart.'

It is a Lenten grace when we are able to hold within us, as Jesus did, the tension of the paradoxes of our lives. The greater the soul, the greater the shadow. Lent teaches us that we must befriend that shadow, even at great personal cost. Otherwise our soul disintegrates, loses connection. We carry no transforming resonance. We become inauthentic within ourselves, empty before others. Worst of all, we feel false before God.

In Lent we grow by dying. There is no other way. In this dying we recognise the false face we've grown used to, the daily lies we tell, the thoughts of deception that crowd our minds, the infidelities we do not commit only because we might get caught, the lovelessness of our lives parading as shallow compassion, our collusion with conformity, our fear of beauty and big dreams. Nowhere else, but in this awareness of our sins, can we ever be reached and saved. We die to self when we sweat blood to stay faithful, when we sacrifice the ego of our vanity for the essence of our truest being.

This is the dying that daily scrapes the self-renewing fat of pride from the ribs of our soul, bringing a fearless, inner lightness and clarity. When the eye is unblocked, the Buddhists tell us, the vision is sure. This is the liberating dying that puts the truth in our eyes, the resonance in our voice, the power in our presence, the depth in our listening. Since we are now all connected up inside, our heart is no longer divided. Rinsed and cauterised, all that is unauthentic is zapped from our infected being. When the small gods go, God arrives. Heaven, in the end, is where we belong.