

Lent and beyond

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Before we start, I would like us to pray for Charmain, who was supposed to preach this morning, but who has been quite ill the whole week. Yesterday morning it was clear that she would not be able to preach today and with Graeme in Pretoria West, my number is up. So, let's pray for Charmain,

[PRAY for Charmain]

[PRAY for the message being received]



Also, depending on how things go, I might have to sit down, as my neck injury is still with me, but we'll see how things go. Right! Let's get into it!

Introduction

For us Lent starts on Ash Wednesday (14 February this year), and Graeme wanted a sermon today which helps prepare us for the Lenten season. So, let us start by looking at where it comes from and some of the forms it takes. The short answer is that no-one really knows exactly when and how it started. The first explicit reference that we have to Lent is in the early 300s, shortly after the Council of Nicea in AD 325. It is also celebrated in different ways and even at different times, depending on which major church tradition you are in.

You may know that not all churches have the same date for Easter because they use different calendars, but there are other differences as well, such as when Lent starts and when it ends, impacted by whether the 40 days are consecutive or not. See how confusing the 'Traditions of Men' can be? (Because it's not a Biblical injunction.) This is almost where 'that's interesting' becomes 'that's boring', so I'll end with this: The Methodist Church is part of a body of churches where the days of Lent are not consecutive. This is because Sundays are seen as perennial celebration days, making the sombreness of Lent not particularly applicable to Sundays.

In all honesty, I am not really interested in all of that, but I am *very* interested in the concept behind Lent: why it exists at all. It is meant to be a time where we engage in the following practises of justice with renewed vigour, namely

- Prayer (seen as justice toward God)
-  Fasting (seen as justice toward self)
-  Alms-giving (seen as justice toward others)

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Originally the fasting aspect was quite serious, but over the centuries it has diminished to the point where people now often don't do much more than give up on one or two aspects of their life, such as abstaining from coffee and TV programmes. Like Lent itself, those are symbolic acts, but I want us to look at 'the reason for the season' of Lent, which is why this sermon's title is

Body

I read a joke the other day where someone said ‘I give up my New Year’s resolutions for Lent.’ That resonates with today’s topic, because as I mentioned in my devotion two Thursdays ago, apparently about 80 *per cent* of people would have given up on their New Year’s resolutions by Valentine’s Day, which this year is also Ash Wednesday.

As mentioned above, the fasting aspect of Lent has in many cases been watered down merely to giving up something for the duration of Lent. I think that that approach is problematic because it is phrased in the negative. How you frame a statement or a question is of vital importance. For example, "Why am I failing?" will lead to certain kind of answers, while "How can I succeed here?" will lead to a completely different kind. The thing is, we need both an acknowledgement and an understanding of what is wrong as well as the knowledge of what to do instead. The point of God's Word is not *information* — it is *transformation!*

An example closer to home for many of us is our health. When I was about 16 I had a six-pack, was generally ripped, and extremely fit (cycling 160 km in a day was something I saw as fun). As I got older, I stopped exercising, and I put on weight. I went backwards to the point where I could not walk one kilometre without having to rest, as well as a host of other issues. Then I changed my diet, lost almost 20 kg, and I could easily out-walk my son, who was then 20 years old. He is now 31 and I have put on 12 kg, sadly none of it muscle.

So, what changed? Do I no longer know what I knew then? No, I know very well what I should be doing. Is it motivation? Don’t I *want* to do the necessary? No, I really want to, but ... I just don’t. It is a case of getting caught up in the *minutiae* of life and of taking the path of least resistance in the moment, but which becomes the path of greatest resistance when you want to change it. This is addressed in Hebrews 12:1–2, which actually follows on from Chapter 11, which lists many champions of the Faith. It reads

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith,

who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

There is no way that you can run in a race if you have weights on you, nor if you have anything which clings to you closely.

I could continue, but I know that in the main I am today preaching to the converted. Like my example of my non-exercise, we know how we ought to live and we know how we ought *not* to live, yet how many of us can truly say that we know that we are running with endurance the race God has set before us? How many of us have weights which hold us back, sin which clings closely to us?

My exercise example is not over. Consider that the diagnosis is easy: I am (or maybe you also are!) unfit. The treatment, however, is going to take a lot more than merely stopping doing certain things. It is also going to require starting (and continuing!) a number of other things. Also, as good as we know those things are, most of us really struggle to keep up with what is required, and part of the reason is how we live our lives. Our unfitness is a result of how we live,

so becoming and staying fit means a lot of work, since we have to *change how we live*. It is clear that *information* alone is insufficient — we need *transformation*.

Bringing this back to the spiritual, we know what the problem is: it is sin.

The opening chapter of Isaiah is quite direct. There is a lot in it, but one of the core portions is in verses 15 to 20:

15 When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.	6
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So even though the people prayed and apparently engaged in worship, God would not hear them, because their hands were full of blood, and they had done evil deeds. What God wants them to do instead is outlined in verses 16 and 17, which read

16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil,	7
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17 learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.	8
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So God wants them to remove the filth of their sin, cease their evil and their wrongdoing, and to start doing other things. Note that the first step after washing, cleansing, and removal of their evil deeds is to ‘learn to do good’. That is not something which happens in the blink of an eye; it takes time. Furthermore, each of the other points they are to do takes time and effort. None of it is easy. It is only then that we get to one of the more famous verses in Isaiah, verse 18:

“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”	9
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Now we have the context, and it is quite rough in terms of where the people are: God is not even listening to their many prayers and He is hiding his eyes from them. Yet He offers them a chance if they change. But if they don’t, there are consequences. We see this in verses 19–20:

19 “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; 20 but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”	10
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Note how verse 19 starts: ‘If you are willing and obedient’. I had a look at an exegetical Hebrew commentary¹, and it makes it so clear, translating it as ‘If you consent in your wills, and are also obedient in your actions’. We have all seen or been children who might have been doing what was required of them, but *only just*. That is not the obedience that God wants. The implications of James 2:19 are sobering. It reads

You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe — and shudder!	11
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1 See the *Pulpit Commentary* at <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/isaiah/1-19.htm>.

Willing obedience is an act of worship, and worship is something freely given. In fact, at the end of the day, it is all about worship: whom you worship, and what that worship looks like. It is not singing, helpful though that may be. Rather, it is submission to God's Will, and kneeling and bowing down are symbolic of that. Recall Daniel and his friends who refused to bow down to the king's statue, because they would not worship anyone or anything else. This is made very clear in Revelation 22:8–9, where John describes his reaction to the angel who had shown him the revelation. Let's read it:

'I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, but he said to me, "You must not do that!"	12
I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God."	13

Conclusion

I want to encourage all of us during this pre-Lent season to do more than to consider what we can 'give up for Lent'. Look beyond Lent: look to the rest of your life. Look at your present and move back in time, considering what you should have done differently. Are you still doing some of those things? It may not be to the same degree, but consider how the way in which you say or do things impact others. This is not an exercise where you hand a stick to others to wack you, but it is an honest and earnest seeking of The Lord to show you how you can follow Him more nearly and love Him more dearly. The extract from Isaiah chapter one is a tiny sample of a massive trove of instructions we have in Scripture about how to live.

Sometimes we need a nudge (or even a kick!) to get us going, and maybe this period of Lent is going to be that for you and for me. In and of itself Lent has no special power: it is simply a tradition, but like many traditions, great benefit can be derived from observing it, and I encourage you to do just that.

So as you think about what — starting with Lent — you are going to change, consider both what should be let go of as well as what should come in its place. Though not directly applicable to many, the principle of Ephesians 4:28 applies to us all. It reads

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labour, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.	14
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Almost invariably, when we look at our lives in this way we will come up against issues with others. In some cases repentance will be required, and in some cases forgiveness. If you caused damage, repent! That means to turn away from and no longer engage in that from which you are repenting. In some instances restitution would be required — pray about it and seek wise counsel (praying about that as well).

If someone hurt you, then forgiveness is definitely the order of the day, as unforgiveness will eat away at your heart and mind. It does not mean that the other person is 'off the hook', so to speak, but that you are no longer letting that thing consume you. You may need to reach out to the other party, and in my experience at least sometimes there is a misunderstanding at the root of it all, though not always. Regardless, Jesus made it extremely clear when He gave us The Lord's Prayer as well as His own commentary thereafter. Listen to this; it is Matthew six verses 12, 14, and 15:

12 ... forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.	15
14 ... For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.	16

I had a look at the Greek, and the words for debts² and for debtors³ are slightly different. ‘Our debts’ refers to ‘the *result* of having a debt, focusing on the after-effect of the obligation’, while ‘our debtors’ refers to someone who has an obligation to repay a debt, or someone who has sinned.

In verses 14 and 15, the Greek for forgive⁴ in both verses is the same and the Greek for trespasses⁵ in both verses is the same. The word for forgive has many possible meanings depending on the context, but the essence is forgiveness and release. Trespasses is interesting; it includes sin, but also such concepts as a false step, a slip, a lapse, an error. So we have a number of potential issues that it covers, and most of them are apparently minor, but look at the consequence if we don’t forgive these.

So, yes: food for serious thought.

When we sit down and think hard enough, we shall soon discover that we have a *lot* to change, so to cope with it all, start by praying and thinking about just one fundamental change you need to make. Ask God to show you what it should be, and be prepared for things to start going wrong. You see, Satan does not like it when we get serious about our faith, especially when we are not guided by our emotions, but by God and we apply our hearts and our minds. You may be surprised by the implied dichotomy between heart and emotions, so this is how I see it.

In Mark 12 Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is, and this is how He answered, in verses 29–31

Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’	17
The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”	18

The Worship Team can make their way to the front: I have a very short prayer at the end.

There is a lot more to that than this, but this is what I want to zoom in on now, namely that Jesus says we should love The Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. In the Greek, the word translated as heart is *kardia*, from which we get cardiac and related words. Interestingly, in both the Old and the New Testaments, ‘heart’ is always used figuratively, and is described as the ‘*desire*-producer that makes us tick.’ and as ‘our *desire-decisions* that establish who we really are.’⁶ So we see that decisions (thus mind) are also involved here, so it is more than mere emotion. Our heart has the capacity for tenderness and compassion, while emotions are usually extremely selfish. So, having seen that our hearts and our minds interact in our love for God, we are left with our soul (where the Greek speaks of our vital breath of life) and our strength, which speaks of a force which overcomes immediate resistance.⁷

This strength aspect is of extreme importance. It must be directed by our decisions, which are informed by our heart, and the whole lot works because of the vital breath that is in us. Still, at the end of the day we will be judged by what we have *done* (yes, Christians will be judged; see

2 <https://biblehub.com/greek/3783.htm>

3 <https://biblehub.com/greek/3781.htm>

4 <https://biblehub.com/greek/863.htm>

5 <https://biblehub.com/greek/3900.htm>

6 <https://biblehub.com/greek/2588.htm>

7 The Greek text analysis for Mark 12:30 is at <https://biblehub.com/text/mark/12-30.htm>.

Matthew 16:27 and 2 Corinthians 5:9–10). I also encourage you to read and to study James chapters one and two. If you're up to it, the whole of Matthew 25 is very sobering reading.

There are many facets to this and I probably should have done this over more than one sermon, but I want to leave you with this. It is now just before Lent, when people traditionally examine their lives and decide what to give up for Lent. Please, rather think of this Lent as a beginning and the step into what lies beyond Lent. May it be the beginning of a life lived on purpose as a conscious Christian.

Let us pray.

Dear God,

We declare our utter dependence upon You and thank You for the guidance You give us in Your Word and through Your Holy Spirit. Guide us into Your transformation of our lives.

Amen.