

In conversation with the Scriptures

Lent and suffering; Easter and joy

John Parr explores Lent and Easter, in conversation with Anne Stevens.

Introduction

The lectionary combines some expected readings for the beginning and end of Lent with a series of longer passages from John's Gospel. Passages from the Pentateuch and the prophets sit with readings from Paul and Acts to direct us to the central themes of the Gospel readings. Lent Sundays start with temptation stories that explore what it means to be loyal to God. Later on, Palm Sunday's readings consider humble leadership in a world in turmoil, while Easter Day's passages shed light on the joy that overflows from the new world of resurrection.

The intervening four Sundays take us in a different direction. We read stories from John's Gospel, of Jesus' encounters

with Nicodemus, a Samaritan woman, a man born blind, and his friends from Bethany: Martha, Mary and Lazarus. First impressions leave us wondering about their seasonal credentials, but further reflection draws their seasonality to the surface. The evangelist's narratives address the concerns of his audience, for whom following Jesus is proving costly. Old and New Testament readings stress the importance of faith taking risks, embracing a bigger world, seeing past outward appearance and living hopefully in the face of different kinds of death – all of which are endorsed by the Johannine Jesus. That makes more than enough for a rich Lent rooted in Scripture's deep soils.

Q What is the value of Lent in a largely secular society?

John

Easter occupies Lent rather like Christmas colonises Advent. We are awash with the temptations of hot cross buns and ever more extravagant chocolate well before Ash Wednesday. The idea of 'giving up' things for Lent comes more from culture than church. Time was when food stocks in the northern hemisphere would shrink at this time of year, forcing people to adjust their diets downwards. But the Early Church's Lent was a time to prepare for baptism: the whole community in solidarity with candidates, reflecting on what it meant to follow Jesus in a world that often felt like faith's wilderness.

The value of Lent lies in the questions it raises about everyday life. Where do we invest our basic trust? Who or what do we rely on? How do we use the resources available to us, including the earth's bounty? What does it mean to live in a bigger world with fewer certainties? How can we learn to see beyond outward appearances? How does the apparent absence of Jesus become a sacrament of his presence? Lent means more than giving things up. It's a time to welcome the opportunity to explore together what it means to live wisely and well in the way of Christ.

Anne

It seems that we live in a world where everybody wants to be different. The 'have-nots' long for an easier existence, where they won't have to struggle for the basic necessities of life; while the 'haves' spend a fortune on diets and gym membership, self-help books and mindfulness apps. Lent has a lot to say to both groups. It begins where we are, in the dust and ashes of our mortality, and it takes us on from there through the hardships of the way of the cross to the joy of the resurrection. On every stage of that journey it challenges us to strip away the false gods of our selfishness and greed, and search instead for the lasting treasure of knowing God and serving others. Ultimately it offers us the hope that we can and we will be changed, as we receive new life both before and after death.

Q How does Jesus' Passion affect our approach to suffering?

John

The churches I visit on holiday in Europe are often full of images of what it means to be Christian, never more than in their crucifixes. Larger-than-life plaster torsos display the Saviour's pale skin splattered with vibrant bloodstains. At the other extreme lies the smoothly polished wood of a crucifix, its figure's face one of resigned acceptance. So, are we meant to receive suffering submissively, or embrace it hopefully? There is no right answer, of course. In the Gospels, Jesus does both. Sometimes he accepts the prospect of suffering and sometimes he avoids it. He struggles in Gethsemane, yet ends up submitting to his heavenly Father's will. Before the authorities, there is silent resistance. From the cross, he screams out of solidarity with all who suffer unjustly, and entrusts himself calmly to his Father's welcoming hands.

The story of Jesus' suffering invites us to learn how to discern different kinds of suffering in our world, and pray for courage to respond faithfully.

Anne

Jesus' Passion connects powerfully with our own experiences of betrayal and abandonment, of suffering and injustice. As Jesus dies, he suffers with us, as well as for us. 1 Peter 2.23-24 captures what this can mean for us as individuals and in our relationships with others. On a personal level we can find genuine consolation in our pain, for 'by his wounds you have been healed'. On a wider level we are challenged to follow Jesus' example: 'When he was abused he did not return abuse; when he suffered he did not threaten.' On the cross Christ broke through the cycle of violence and retaliation. Peter sees this as the moment where sin was dealt with, once and for all, leaving us free to 'live for righteousness'. The cross offers a new understanding of God's justice, which brings in its wake the call to work tirelessly for peace and reconciliation.

Q How does the joy of the Easter stories differ from happiness?

John

A sure sign that we live in stressful times is the number of newspaper articles I've read recently about happiness. Wise exponents of happiness acknowledge the ephemeral nature of feelings of contentment, and how dependent they are on changing circumstances. So, I am encouraged to become more resilient, to help me flourish when it seems that everything is against me.

Learning how to be content and resilient are vital life skills that inevitably affect my happiness. I'm not sure, though, that this is the path to joy. The Greek word for joy is *chara*, which is related to *charis*, Greek for grace. Here lies the essential difference between joy and happiness. Joy is a gift, something that the Easter stories make clear. It is a share in Jesus' own joy, which comes from knowing his Father's love and doing his Father's will (John 15.11). Yet the gift can be cultivated. It grows as we learn how to focus on all that comes to us as God's blessing.

Easter joy is not a nostalgic return to the past, but a call to embrace whatever today and tomorrow may bring. I already have some of the resources I need for this, but what is deepest and most sustaining comes as sheer gift, like the surprising appearance of the risen Christ in a place associated with death.

Anne

For me the joy of Easter is closely connected to the hope that it offers. If death can be overcome, then that means there is always some kind of light shining in our darkness, some way through the moments of despair and disillusionment that can descend on all of us at times. St Paul's letters are full of this joy, even when he finds himself in the most desperate situations. Rooted in his powerful encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road, it gives him the certainty to say that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God (Romans 8.31-39), and this is what enables him to keep going. Unlike happiness, which comes and goes according to our circumstances, this Easter joy is far more active, rekindling in us the confidence to believe that the love and the justice of God will always in the end prevail.

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