

Giving it up

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Daily Bible readings from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day

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Introduction

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.

MARCEL PROUST

Of all the traditions associated with Lent, probably the best-known is the practice of giving something up for the six and a half weeks from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. The most common things people give up are chocolate, alcohol, coffee and sweets. Some people give up something non-edible—a time-consuming habit, for instance, like watching TV or surfing the net—and some take the opportunity of Lent to kick a habit like smoking or swearing. But why do we give things up? Where did the tradition begin, and what is it supposed to achieve?

There's clear evidence that for at least 1500 years the Church has kept a period of fasting during the weeks before Easter, and it's thought that it may date even further back to the very early Church. The word 'Lent' comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *Lencten*, from which we get our word 'lengthen', and it referred simply to the fact that the weeks leading up to Easter were the early spring days that were lengthening after the winter solstice. The oldest traditions of Lent are interwoven with the idea of spring. Greek Orthodox communities treat the first day of Lent as a celebration of the first outdoor day of the new year: spring is the beginning of new life after the death that came with winter, and so we should go outside to greet it.

In medieval Europe, fasting and abstinence were not re-

stricted to Lent. Eating meat was prohibited by the Church at least one day in every week of the year, and Friday continued to be a 'fish day' until late into the 20th century, as a reminder that it was on Friday that Christ died. In addition to Friday, there were often two or three more days of abstinence in the week, with a great deal of local variation. For instance, in some areas Wednesday was a meat-free day to remember the treason of Judas Iscariot; Saturday was a day to honour the Virgin Mary. There was also a cycle of fasting through the year—the four Ember Days, which mark the beginning of the new seasons, and Advent (the four weeks before Christmas) as well as Lent. So, for the medieval Christian, meat was prohibited for somewhere between a third and a half of all the days in the year; but the Lent fast, representing the 40 days during which Jesus withdrew into the wilderness, was the toughest.

This fast has several purposes. It's supposed to remind us daily that we depend upon God for everything, to draw us closer to God in prayer, to reconnect us to the idea of community, and to help us follow Christ's journey through the wilderness and on to Jerusalem. It's all too easy, though, simply to give up some treat or other for the duration of Lent, feel pleased with ourselves for breaking a bad habit or losing a little weight (or feel a little guilty at not keeping our resolution!) and not really engage with the deeper meaning of Lent.

In the Old Testament, the prophets called the people of God to a 'true fast', one that was not merely the observance of traditions but one that transformed their lives. As we walk through Lent this year, we can explore the idea that there is another kind of 'giving up' that we could do. If we're to draw closer to God, we need to be willing to give up some of our entrenched ideas about God in order to see him more clearly. It's not so much giving up 'false gods'; it's more about identifying false or blurred images of God that have been picked

up from the surrounding culture or from our imagination, and allowing them to be replaced. We need to allow the light to be shed on those places where our idea of God is too harsh, too weak, too small, too fragile, too stern.

We'll begin this Lent journey, then, by looking at the traditions of Lent to gain a clearer picture of what they are for, and what biblical imagery they reflect. Then we'll see what Jesus said about fasting and what he gave up when he fasted in the wilderness. We'll look at the way some Old Testament characters traded in their old idea of God for a true encounter, and see how different the real God was from their expectations. Then we'll see how Jesus turned people's ideas about God upside down. Finally, in Holy Week we'll follow some of the events of the last week in Jesus' life, and discover how different he was from the Messiah people were expecting. In the process, we may find that our own preconceived notions of what God 'ought' to be like come in for some re-examination.

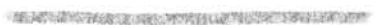
This Lent, then, whether or not you're giving up chocolate or anything else, I invite you to take a journey with me through biblical tales of fasts and wildernesses to seek a clearer vision of God. As we travel, let's pray for grace to be flexible enough in our thinking to allow God to reveal himself to us. As I've been writing this book, I've been surprised at the way in which my own ideas have been changed all over again. To see God more clearly almost certainly means being surprised at what we discover.

Let's take the prayer of St Richard of Chichester (1197–1253) as our daily prayer:

*Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ,
For all the benefits thou hast won for me,
For all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me.*

*O most merciful Redeemer, Friend, and Brother,
May I know thee more clearly,
Love thee more dearly,
And follow thee more nearly,
Day by day.*

ASH WEDNESDAY TO SATURDAY



Giving up

ASH WEDNESDAY

To dust you shall return

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger for ever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust. As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

PSALM 103:8-18

I have mixed feelings about the Ash Wednesday liturgy. The ashes from which Ash Wednesday gets its name are made by taking palm crosses from the previous year's Palm Sunday and burning them. During a service of Holy Communion, the fine grey ash is mixed with a little oil and pressed in the shape of the cross on to the forehead of each worshipper with these

words: ‘Remember that you are but dust: from dust you came, and to dust you shall return. Turn from sin and be faithful to Christ’ (see Genesis 3:19). The ashing ritual is a symbol of the fact that we are quite literally made of dust—billion-year-old carbon from burnt-out stars, as Joni Mitchell sang in the 1970s.

Lent is in part about the recognition of our own humanity, but the words ‘dust to dust’ put us squarely in the same territory as a funeral service. They can seem a dour and punishing declaration of sinfulness, making it hard to see the overriding sense of redemption that the gospel should always carry. Acknowledging both the sinful nature of humanity and our own particular flaws may be essential if we’re to escape the arrogance that makes the human heart leaden and ugly, but there’s a fine line between that and an over-emphasis on sinfulness, which so easily transforms the lightness of the gospel into the straitjacket of religiosity. How can ashes be, in any sense of the word, redemptive and light?

I think, though, that a lightness does emerge from the process of facing down our own demons. When we look our mortality in the face, the inevitability of our own death asks of us, ‘What are you going to do with the life you have?’ Years ago I attended the funeral of Steve Fairnie (known to all his friends simply as ‘Fairnie’), a remarkable and talented man who died suddenly and unexpectedly. I was unprepared for the blow, not only of losing a friend but of facing the fact that young people—people like me—could just be gone from this world, overnight and without warning. The shock of his death was intensified by the sharp realisation that my own life was far more fragile than I had thought, and the resulting mix of grief and disbelief left me feeling in a slightly dream-like state for some weeks to come. ‘I don’t think I’m ready for this,’ I wrote in the words of a song; ‘the thread I’m holding on to is thin.

Would somebody please wake me up? It feels like I'm living in a dream. I don't want to believe that it's true—it's all over.'

The huge church where Fairnie's funeral was held was packed with maybe a thousand people or more—groups of friends and colleagues from widely different contexts—and it gradually became apparent that many of them knew him within their own world without having any idea of the breadth of his influence elsewhere. His art students were there, as were a number of high-profile members of the music industry; there were leading members of various denominations and large contingents from various Christian festivals and communities to which he'd contributed. In place of a traditional sermon, there were tributes and eulogies given by people who had known him in these different contexts, and all over the church you could see people's faces lighting up as they registered the extent of his gifts and achievements. After the funeral was over, tea was served by a group of women from the church, and one of them confided to me, 'We had no idea that he knew all these people. We just thought of him as the college teacher from around the corner.'

In the midst of grief, it seemed that one of Fairnie's parting gifts to his friends was the realisation that we had no idea how long we had to live, either. All the things I'd thought I might do one day suddenly seemed a little more urgent. Not only that, but the breadth of his interests seemed to give permission to flout the cultural wisdom that you can only really do one thing. That day I consciously picked up his Renaissance attitude to life and decided that if I couldn't decide between theology and art and music, then perhaps I would just do them all. Later that year I went to university to take the degree I'd never taken, made another album in my spare time, started writing books and articles, and just for fun I began painting again—something I'd let lie dormant for years.

Despite his many gifts, though, Fairnie wasn't solely focused on achieving things. He always had time for people. I can't count the times he would just stop for a ten-minute chat, and he knew how to get under the skin of a situation enough to find out what was really going on. He always left you feeling six inches taller, and infinitely more capable of living your life. Knowing him left me with the certainty that life can be full, that you should find out what you're good at and do it as much as you can, but also that life is about the community you build, not about building your personal empire.

Pausing to contemplate our mortality on Ash Wednesday is not for the sake of making us bleak, but to startle us into an awareness of the gift of life. We're neither perfect nor immortal: we are merely and yet wonderfully human, and we need to know who we are in our imperfections as well as our gifts in order to live every day as if it counts for something. The call to repentance isn't supposed to leave us dour or morbidly obsessed with our failings. Instead, it's a call to turn away decisively from what keeps us from God, alienates us from other people and stops us from living well. Lent begins with a challenge to clear out the mental and spiritual clutter and so discover how to live life to the full.

THURSDAY

A true fast

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

ISAIAH 58:6-12

In most parts of Europe, the day before Lent is celebrated with some kind of feast or carnival. In England it's called

Shrove Tuesday, the word ‘shrove’ coming from the same root as ‘shrive’ or ‘shriven’, a Middle English word meaning to absolve after hearing confession. In French cultures the day before Lent is called *Mardi Gras* (literally, ‘Fat Tuesday’), which has become synonymous with the idea of party and carnival, a time for relishing freedom and plenty before the fast begins. The *Mardi Gras* carnival has become almost entirely separated from Lent, featuring more as a stand-alone feast than a precursor to the period of discipline and self-restraint that is supposed to follow. It’s interesting, too, to see that Shrove Tuesday is now more commonly known by its popular name, Pancake Day, and, like *Mardi Gras*, has begun to emerge as a non-religious feast.

One day last year, I was standing in a supermarket check-out queue when the woman in front of me suddenly exclaimed, ‘I forgot to buy a lemon!’ She sent one of her children back to get one and, while she was apologising to me for holding up the queue, she explained that she had realised only at the last moment that it was Pancake Day, so she had rushed to the shops specially to buy eggs, sugar, flour, butter and syrup to make their pancakes. We swapped opinions as to whether or not you get better pancakes if you let your pancake batter stand for an hour before you cook it. And then I asked her whether she knew that Pancake Day was the day before Lent. ‘Lent?’ she said quizzically. ‘What’s that, then?’

A few hundred years ago, people would have been baffled if they’d been told that anybody would rush out to buy extra food to celebrate Pancake Day, since the whole point of the pancakes was to use up all the remaining foods that were forbidden during Lent. We know from medieval recipe books that all meat and dairy products were given up for Lent. Households would gradually run down their supplies as Lent approached so that they didn’t go to waste once Lent began,

and on the evening of Shrove Tuesday all remaining eggs, milk, butter and animal fats were used up in the pancake feast.

We seem to be far better at feasting than fasting in our society; but it's interesting that Isaiah seems to suggest that obeying religious rules about what we eat and drink is, in the end, of little interest to God. The 'true fast' that the prophets called for meant not just observing religious rituals but changing the way people lived. Isaiah says that what God really cares about is justice, generosity, and caring for the poor and the weak.

If fasting is merely a display of personal self-discipline, then it is a declaration of one's ability to be spiritual without any help from God. To become the kind of people Isaiah describes, we need an inner transformation that we can't achieve by our own efforts. It doesn't happen through the fasting itself; only God can transform our souls.

So is there any point in fasting at all? Should we abandon the practice of giving things up, and instead attend simply to the issues that Isaiah names, like fighting against injustice and oppression? Even though these are the issues that really matter, there is still value in giving things up for a time, simply because it pushes us to be countercultural. We live in a society that eats, drinks and spends to excess, and even in recessionary times we have more than most of the world can dream of. Much of what we buy, we do not use. Research published in March 2007 revealed that about one-third of food bought in British shops ends up in rubbish bins. The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), a government body funded by Defra, said that overbuying, wrong storage temperatures and fussy children were among the reasons people gave for throwing away 6.7 million tonnes of food waste a year, only half of which is peelings, scraps and bones. A staggering half of that amount is perfectly edible food that just hasn't been eaten.

Before leaving the memory of Shrove Tuesday behind, it's

sobering to reflect on the fact that Pancake Day, which began as a way of using up surplus food, has now become yet one more opportunity for supermarkets to sell us more and more food, much of which will end up going to waste. One radical move we could make this Lent is to look at the level of waste in our own households. Instead of giving up desserts or coffee, what if we gave up an hour or two each week during Lent to rethink our shopping and cooking habits so that we buy and cook only what we need, use up leftovers and reduce unnecessary waste? Maybe next year, instead of buying extra food that we don't need for Pancake Day, we could return to celebrating it as a feast of leftovers. When we discover that change is possible in our kitchens, we'll begin to believe that it's also possible on a global scale, and that the inequality and injustice in the world really can be addressed.