

Lent: the Suffering Servant

Retreat by Fr Liam OCD

23rd to 25th Feb 2007

Boars Hill

Lent is gloomily associated with sin and penance but is actually the development of LIGHT in our darkness. By letting this light permeate our daily life we become evangelists in the world.

What carries us over the weeks of Lent? It is the liturgy: Isaiah (the poems of the suffering servant) in the Mass, Exodus (Moses leading the people out of Egypt) in the breviary and New Testament readings in the Gospel.

Moses

Moses depicts the story of repentance following a very serious problem (murder of an Egyptian) being resolved through family life, children and work. Then he is *called* to save the people of Israel from slavery, to lead them out into the wilderness and thence to the promised land. But Moses himself does not enter the promised land, because he doubted.

This doubt and “failure” is resolved. Moses is beside Jesus at the Transfiguration in LIGHT, in spite of his great mistakes.

The story of the liberation of the people touches into the places where *we* are held hostage, in slavery. The liberated people in the desert experienced three stages on their journey: initial jubilation, doubt with despair and rejection of God, and then exasperation with Moses and God after wandering in the desert for 40 years. Moses was also exasperated with the people and God exasperated with the people and with Moses!

Progress was made through the most unexpected event. The Book of Numbers describes the serpent on Moses’ staff healing the people bitten by snakes. This reversal of Eden’s downfall symbolises Christ healing us by the cross. The theme is developed by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews.

Read it direct from the Scriptures, do not read from other people’s commentaries.

Once you are in the scriptures, steep yourself in the scriptures, arms come round us, they anchor our deepest fears. Jesus went down into hell, he smashed the chains of death and sin, death has no hold over us. The Holy Spirit will be your guide, Jesus is with us in his Word, just as he is in the Blessed Sacrament.

Take the hand of God and walk in acceptance, your deepest self will be healed. Our deepest neurotic, mental problems will be resolved.

We are so restless for immediate answers, we don't rest and let the liturgy speak.

Lent takes us through distress, sorrow, break-up, loss, sin....., but God is with us. Salvation is lived out in the events of our lives *now*.

Christ in his life experienced increasing hostility and rejection. We need to look at our own intolerances, people we hate, reject. When I am failing to recognise these in myself, I am failing to recognise Christ.

The power of this mystery raises us up, releases these "demons" in myself, these intolerances, fears, angers. Repentance is not about lists and resolutions (to give up something). It is about experiencing something within.

Sanctimonious solitude may be stinking with hate.
Solitude may be affirmation of my ego.

Enjoy Lent: it is about liberation. Scripture opens us in a beautiful way. It takes away fear – of loving, of reaching out, of light, of God, of brother and sister. "Fear of God is the hatred of evil" – the evil that lies hidden in our hearts.

Be confident in Christ.

The Messianic Poems

The suffering servant in Isaiah and in the Passion offers us a mirror of ourselves, offers us Jesus and his light. Isaiah chapters 40 to 55 are about the suffering servant and the Messianic predictions.

Ch 42, 1-4

Ch 49, 1-6

Ch 50, 4-9

Ch 52, 13 to 53, 12

These are the messianic poems. They call to mind Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you". To the Jews, a "servant" meant a "slave". Jesus insists on using this term, to the discomfort of his disciples. The whole of the New testament is peppered with servant songs.

The serpent in the Garden becomes the symbol of Christ: God *became* sin, abominable. (ab = from, omin = omen, he became "from a bad omen"). The serpent then became the symbol of healing when Moses raised his staff with a snake climbing round it to heal anyone bitten by the serpents. This snake winding round a staff is now the symbol of healing in medicine.

God entered into human suffering.

He became incarnate, he became a baby. The first six months of life are the most vulnerable, the infant needs the touch, the skin of mother to feel safe. The suffering of the child begins when she feels she will be rejected unless she behaves in a certain way. By six years a child has worked out where and with whom she is safe. However, this may be a feeling of predictability about being a “bad” child: Billy Connelly thought his name was “Shut up”.

The story of childhood may be formed by avoidance of suffering, the hell of manoeuvring between parents who are alternately accepting or rejecting and hostile.

Later, suffering comes through relationships, the choices the person makes (repeatedly) with people. Marriage can be intense suffering and can result in fossilised patterns to save ourselves from suffering. Seventy percent of hate is because “some-one is better than I am”, “I’ll resent you”, “you’re in *my* space”.

God is the creator of *everything*.

God entered into the unpredictable, the most vulnerable, the place of nothingness. He physically speaks of this in his babyhood. He’s been there! Therefore I have no need to accrue “security”. Christ says “do not be afraid” so many times: after he was transformed in light at the transfiguration for example. But as soon as he manifested light and beautifulness, as he claimed to be the Son of God, the forces closed in against him.

In his suffering Jesus wants to speak into the blood of each one of us. As Eden is the story of the destruction of the unity of man and God, which is sin, Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection is the story of the unity revived. It is through his suffering in each one of us, in every human being, in creation, that his death and resurrection are realised.

Isaiah

Is 42, 1-4

Here is my servant whom I uphold...

When I read this, I bring my own family suffering to it. *I* am in the Son of God, in Jesus, therefore it speaks to *me*. I am his servant whom he upholds, his chosen one in whom his soul delights. “Faithfully I bring true justice”, all because Christ is in me and I am in him. True justice is at home, with regard to my children, my husband, my wife. This Word can anoint me.

“He does not snuff the faltering flame” - we are all “candles in the wind” as Elton John sang at Diana’s funeral.

Is 49, 1-6

Jahweh called me before I was born...

This is the primordial call, Von Balthasar speaks of our beauty in this forming of my being.

In the African tradition, my name is spoken from my mother’s arms. God is part of that moment when I am named: I am given a name by God. The conception is God’s: the

baby does not in essence *belong* to the mother or father, but has his or her own identity as created by God. The spirit of the child is not touched by the way he is conceived.

The Gospel lives in blood, sweat and tears. The Mother of God holds me. Like all mothers, she is afraid the father may be a bit rough, she watches that the father, God the Father, holds me gently.

“I have toiled in vain.” How often do we feel abandoned, that nothing has been any use, we have missed the boat, we are dangling between heaven and earth? But all the while my cause was with Jahweh.

Is 50, 4-9

The Lord Jahweh has given me a disciple's tongue, for me to know how to give a word of comfort to the weary...

This speaks for itself.

Is 52,13 to 53,12

He shall be lifted up...

This is the crucifixion and the resurrection together, one in the other, suffering and new life.

*The Word can anoint you
Sit silently in it and the Spirit will show you
There is no other way*

The sadness and sorrow of our lives are uniquely tailored to help us, but self pity is egotistical and destructive. The compromised silence of tolerance (to avoid confrontation and suffering) in a marriage results in darkness. The light cannot get in. Listening, looking, seeing and being with others is the only place where God can be.

The face of Christ is seen in his infancy, his mission and work, in the shame and spittle, when he is risen and glorious. There is no such thing as not being able to pray any more because Jesus prays for us, in us. He experienced all aspects in his own life but also in each one of us. I *am* changed.

Now we look at the New Testament readings that take us through Lent:

Matt 3:13-17 The baptism of Christ

Mark 10, 38-39 Jesus replies to the sons of Zebedee

Can you drink the cup I must drink, or be baptised with the baptism with which I must be baptised? ...The cup that I must drink you shall drink, and with the baptism with which I must be baptised you shall be baptised.

Lent is about baptism and Christ's victory over death and sin. The birthing of our fulfilment comes in death, the person who is "known before being conceived in her mother's womb" is completed by the fullness of Christ. To die in peace means to live in peace. My death is already lived by Jesus – as are all deaths – by his going into the Jordan. I share his baptism, am anointed by his Spirit in baptism. Christ fulfils the prophesy of Isaiah.

The ravages of life and death have been met by Jesus, he takes them *all* on himself. In Lent we journey into the deepest part of our fears, expose them to the LIGHT, because Jesus is there in the deepest fears. He has carried all the pain and suffering of the world, of every human being, even me! These fears may emerge in attitudes in families, often driven by fear and insecurity.

Come into the place of suffering, be *steady* in the face of suffering. Touching and being with people at a deeper level can be frightening, can expose pain, we don't need to "solve" it, Jesus is in that depth.

"Liberated" society is famished of security, tenderness, steady affection. Where is its anchor? Jesus' baptism in the Jordan was the anchor for the disciples, it is for us too. The baptism in the Jordan is our entrance into the suffering and passion of Jesus. My incapacity and fear is swept up into his baptism. The waters of the Jordan are the Mass, prayer. They give me strength in my humanity and in my relationships.

Luke 9: 28-36 The Transfiguration (in the Rosary's 4th Mystery of Light)

While he was praying, his face became transfigured.

Prayer is a melting place of love for Jesus with his Father.

John 17: 1-23

Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and said, "the hour has come, glorify your son..."

Jesus experienced what sin does to body, mind and spirit. He was the sacrificial lamb, willing victim of the destructive cycle of power when it is used to exercise control in order to get something back. We see this all around us, experience it in our own lives. Acceptance of whatever happens is my hope, he carries us with him. The death I will die is already lived in Jesus. Jesus gives us the *capacity* to face things whereas theories only give us the theory. By living the suffering we can recognise the spirit and help others.

Luke 2: 22-40 The presentation in the temple

What a thing to tell a happy young couple who have brought their gorgeous baby into the temple to celebrate his consecration to the Lord, as the first born. A child destined for great things? No, destined to be a sign that is rejected – and his mother is told - a sword shall pierce her own soul too.

Once Jesus starts to teach and work wonders, waves of undercurrents determine things much more powerfully than what is *said*. There is an anthropomorphic relatedness between a child and his mother and father. Parents are made saints by their children because their prayer goes out onto the relationship. Think of St Augustine’s mother. For those without children, their prayer also goes out into their relationships. One can live in a family or in a community and not be touched by it, “I get along quite comfortably, thank you!” Or one can *really* live in relationship with that family or community, with each person, and suffer and rejoice with them.

Luke 22: 39–56 Gethsemane

A place of hell, a horrific place, this is the fear humanity lives in. We live out fear, over children who are into drugs, families breaking down etc. Jesus told Peter (when he took out his sword) “stop trying to be helpful, you’re a nuisance”. *Jesus* is the answer to all this, not our reactive and human response. It was to absorb the evil capacity in man in his freedom that Jesus’ body was destroyed. The world responded with silence.

The chains of slavery are broken and shattered by LIGHT

Easter Vigil

The power of this holy night dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy; it casts out hatred, brings us peace, and humbles earthly pride. The Easter candle symbolises Christ’s LIGHT.

Mark 16: the Resurrection

We give witness in our everyday lives to the deepest message of new growth and light.
