

SERMON: 26 February 2017 - Rev Dr Brenda Robson

“Man does not live on bread alone”

Matthew 4:1-11

Deuteronomy 8:1-9

I have never given up anything for Lent, at least not in the sense of giving up a food item or drink or a specific activity.

It was not a family tradition as I grew up, it was never promoted in any churches I have attended, having studied theology at university, I was not inclined to change this practice or rather non-practice.

Some see Lenten practices as mainly Roman Catholic. On Ash Wednesday, soot on the forehead is an obvious sign of the beginning of Lent.

But the Protestant churches after the Reformation continued to mark the 40 days of Lent leading up to Easter.

The problem for me is how people in today's society think about Lent.

For some, it has no religious meaning at all. Lots of people will make pancakes on Tuesday - Shrove Tuesday or Pancake Day. Pancake making will feature on television, children will make pancakes in nurseries and schools and at home but for many, these activities are simply pancake making, nothing more.

Most people are probably unaware of the religious symbolism and significance of Shrove Tuesday. It was a day for confession of sins before Lent began. It was a day to use up rich, fatty foods which would not be eaten during Lent. The ingredients were said to symbolize the four pillars of the Christian faith--eggs for creation, flour for sustaining life, salt for wholesomeness and milk for purity. In many Christian parish churches, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, a popular Shrove Tuesday tradition is the ringing of the church bells (on this day, the toll is known as the Shriving Bell) "to call the faithful to confession and for housewives to "begin frying their pancakes.

For many, giving up some food for Lent today has more to do with health, dieting and the need to lose weight than about faith and confession.

For others, it is a religious time, a time for traditions at a superficial level.

I heard on the radio on Friday that a County Galway church is allowing parishioners to get their Ash Wednesday blessing - from the comfort of their own car.

Glenamady Church is holding a 'drive-thru' service on March 1, where motorists

can drive through the church grounds and get their foreheads daubed with ash through their car window.

Parish priest Father Paddy Mooney is holding the “innovative” service in response to modern worshippers being too busy for a conventional Mass as “people and families are on the move all the time”.

He hopes that the morning facility will become a popular way for the flock to fit the Lenten tradition into hectic lives.

Needless to say, the first drive thru service took place last year in America, in Houston, Texas.

Did you know that you can buy cards to send to people for Lent? I looked at some this week.

One card said “I believe I’m getting closer to God by spending a few weeks not eating M & Ms.”

Another said “Lent is just a second chance for those of you who failed to keep New Year resolutions.”

Another, “Let’s celebrate the end of Lent by doing everything we pretended to give up for Lent.”

And finally “Let’s give up our worst vices with the understanding that in just over a month we’ll indulge in them with twice the enthusiasm.”

Lent is a serious business. It is a time to reflect on the sinfulness of men and women that led to Jesus dying on a cross. It is a time to reflect on our own inadequacies and weaknesses, a time to take stock, a time to draw closer to God, a time to identify with Christ and re-dedicate ourselves to him. It might be a time to make sacrifices and deprive ourselves of “some thing” in order to try to understand Christ’s suffering – but that is heavy business. How can we even begin to approach the sacrifice and suffering of Jesus? – certainly not by giving up chocolate for six weeks!

Lent is completely Christ-centred and cross-focused.

It is not a time to be self-focused, to invite the world to look at how holy and religious we are – “Look at me, I’ve given up X for Lent! What are you giving up?”

Lent means “fortieth”, beginning on the fortieth day before Easter Sunday. The forty days of Lent commemorates the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted by the devil at the outset of his ministry.

Jesus himself refers back to the 40 years that the Israelites spent in the wilderness with Moses after their escape from Egypt.

For the Israelites, this was a time of testing and trial, proving obedience to God, suffering and being relieved of suffering when God intervened and provided water and manna and clothing and all the things that he knew the people needed.

We read in Deuteronomy 8:3 – **He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.**”

To those who pass the test, God makes amazing promises, promises to the Israelites and to us today. At Deuteronomy 8:6 - **Observe the commands of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and revering him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land – a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills – a land of milk and honey.**

Many people are longing to leave their wilderness, their time in the desert, people in dry times, times of dry bones, longing for breakthrough. God says “I see you in the desert, I am meeting your needs in the present but I have greater plans for you.” He has got you this far and he will not abandon you now!

Jeremiah 29:11- **“For I know the plans I have for you” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me and I will listen to you. You will seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you” declares the Lord, “and I will bring you back from captivity.”**

The Israelites finally inherited the promised land.

Jesus endured the 40 days of temptation in the wilderness in order that we might inherit our promised land. He did it for us.

Jesus did this at the very beginning of his ministry. No sooner had he stepped up out of the waters of baptism where the holy spirit descended on him from above, that same spirit led him out into the desert. No sooner had God declared “This is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased,” the Son of God immediately suffers isolation and hunger and temptation.

There is no honeymoon period at the beginning of this ministry, no time to gradually adjust to a new phase in life. Jesus has lived for 30 years in a loving family, he has known the security of loving parents, younger brothers and sister, a roof over his head and food on the table. That suddenly changes dramatically and forever. He sacrifices what we would see as home comforts for the perilous life of the itinerant preacher, the revolutionary challenger, the sacrificial lamb.

The 40 days in the desert mark the phase of transition, time to be alone with God, to leave the past behind, to become physically weaker but spiritually stronger.

We often comment that the hard experiences in life can make us stronger, perhaps wiser, more resilient, more understanding. God works all things together for good.

Jesus is tempted by the devil who desperately wants to stop the Son of God in his tracks. The devil knows that if Jesus is allowed to suffer and to die and to be resurrected from death then his own power is over. And so he tries to tempt Jesus to follow an easier path. But Jesus resists temptation and defeats the devil's schemes. If Jesus had failed the tests there would have been no ministry, no triumph over death, no forgiveness and salvation for you and I, no life in eternity with God in heaven.

Jesus chose the sacrifice and the suffering. This is what we remember through Lent.

Jesus coming from the throne of heaven, to take on human form and live among us.

The king of glory coming to serve the lowliest person on earth

The Saviour of the world wrapping a towel around his waist to wash his disciples' feet

He was pure and without sin but they nailed him to a cross for our sins, that we might be forgiven.

The light of the world lay in the darkness of the tomb.

Can we truly commemorate what Jesus did by giving up chocolate for 40 days?

Can we deepen our faith and understanding by giving up crisps for 40 days?

Is giving up beer for 40 days a worthy way to the cross?

Lent is a time to remember these things but it also a time to examine ourselves, our own response to the call of Jesus on our lives, our response in confession and dedication and commitment and love.

I'm not saying that you shouldn't give up something for Lent, I really have no problem with that so long as there is something more. Lent is about giving up and doing less but it also requires stepping up and doing more.

Use this time to read your bible more, to better understand the scriptures. Get into a better routine for bible reading. Perhaps you could get a book of daily readings if you don't already have one.

Jesus relied heavily on the word of God to combat temptation in the wilderness and to defeat the evil one.

From Deuteronomy 8:4 – Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God

From Deuteronomy 6:16 – Do not put the Lord your God to the test

From Deuteronomy 6:13 – Worship the Lord your God and serve him only

It tells us in 2 Timothy 3:16 (in The Message) that **“There’s nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.”**

Give up time to read more, give up time to pray more. You can be sure the Jesus prayed constantly to his father in heaven. Set aside some time every day to be with God. Come together in Holy Week for prayer in the church on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.

Reflect through Lent on Jesus the Servant King and consider how God might call you to serve him in new ways, perhaps in church, perhaps elsewhere in the community.

And if you do give up something for Lent, don't talk about it to others. Do it quietly, personally between you and God. To talk about it is to boast about our own “holiness,” saying “Look at me, I'm so good and holy. What are you doing for Lent?”

When someone does ask us what we're giving up for Lent, I suspect we feel more comfortable saying I'm giving up Prosecco than saying I'm trying to give up some time to read my bible and pray more and get closer to Jesus. Therein lies a challenge!

Amen