

**A sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand in the evening of the first Sunday of Lent 7 February 2016.**

*Some of the material below is drawn from the website Journey with Jesus.*

Since the fourth century, Christians have observed the 40 week days before Easter as a period of reflection, repentance, fasting, abstinence, and acts of mercy. Lent is also a time to reflect on our createdness, the limited nature of our lives, of our created limitations.

Lent isn't an end in itself. It's not moralism where we tut-tut raucous living. During Lent we enact a paradox - that to live fully in the here and now, we need to embrace our mortality, our createdness, our limitedness, our humanness. And that our hope in Easter resurrection needs to pass through and indeed, in a sense, emerge from the certainty of our physical death.

The practices of Lent like giving up chocolate or alcohol or feeling guilty, are not about being depressed killjoys. During Lent we shed the superfluous aspects of our lives in order to pare back, to drill down and "take hold of the life that is truly life indeed" (1 Timothy 6:19). On Ash Wednesday, Bosco Peters noted that Lent tends towards the dynamic of autumn, of shedding stuff, shedding busyness, activities, behaviours, ways of being, in order to focus on the central thing, the one thing, the core thing. Through Lent we seek the "abundant life" Jesus said he came to give everyone, a life that embraces and transcends material existence (John 10:10).

Death is the ultimate paring back, to the central, the core, the lasting, the essential, the one thing that is required.

Caitlin Doughty's memoir is called *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes and Other Lessons from the Crematory* (2014). She notes how, unlike a hundred years ago when people died at home and every family dealt with death up close and personal, today we have medicalized death and outsourced it to professionals.

Doughty wants to "look mortality straight in the eye." "When you know that death is coming for you, the thought inspires you to be ambitious, to apologize to old enemies, call your grandparents, work less, travel more, learn Russian, take up knitting. Fall in love." Doughty is irreligious, but she sounds very Lenten.

Similarly, in his book *Being Mortal*, Gawande observes how elderly people who are more mindful of mortality often shift their life priorities to being rather than doing, to giving rather than getting, to friendships rather than accomplishments, to family rather than work, and so on.

Lent is beautiful and powerful. It exposes what Gawande calls "the prevailing fantasy that we can be ageless."

We recite God's words to Adam, "for dust you are, and to dust you will return." In contrast to Satan's lie to Eve: "surely you will not die!"

We remember death as a way to affirm life, to enable us to live more fully in the present.

The temptation story takes us into the desert.

The word for desert in Greek is *eremos* and literally means "abandonment" and is the term from which we derive the word "hermit." The desert was a place of coming face to face with loneliness and death.

Our very existence is threatened in the desert.

In the desert we attend to temptations that distract us from a wide-hearted focus on the presence of God.

In the desert tradition, death is a friend and companion along the journey. St Francis of Assisi referred to death as "sister", heightening our awareness of life's beauty and calling us toward living more fully.

Alan Jones says: ". . . even our despair is to be given up and seen as the ego-grasping device that it really is. Despair about ourselves and our world is, perhaps, the ego's last and, therefore, greatest attachment."

In the desert Jesus faced three temptations

- to immediate gratification (changing stones into bread),
- to power (over all the kingdoms of the earth) and
- glory (spectacularly throwing himself off the temple yet unharmed).

It's not the temptations that harm us, but how we decide to respond.

Let me read from Christine Paintner

**I am called to fast from being strong** and always trying to hold it all together, and instead embrace the profound grace that comes through my vulnerability and tenderness, to allow a **great softening** this season.

**I am called to fast from anxiety** and the endless torrent of thoughts which rise up in my mind to paralyze me with fear of the future, and **enter into the radical trust** in the abundance at the heart of things, rather than scarcity.

**I am called to fast from speed** and rushing through my life, causing me to miss the **grace shimmering right here in this holy pause**.

**I am called to fast from multitasking** and the destructive energy of inattentiveness to any one thing, so that I get many things done, but none of them well, and none of them nourishing to me. Instead **my practice will become a beholding** of each thing, each person, each moment.

**I am called to fast from endless list-making** and too many deadlines, and enter into the quiet and listen for what is **ripening and unfolding**, what is ready to be born.

**I am called to fast from certainty** and trust in the **great mystery of things**.

And then perhaps, I will arrive at Easter and realize those things from which I have fasted I no longer need to take back on again. **I will experience a different kind of rising.**

Lent says we do not need to be stuck in tired ways of thinking and acting. Renewal is possible. Change can happen. Consider what's really important for a good life.



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