

**"Blessed are they who going through the vale of misery use it for a well...the Lord shall withhold no good thing from them that live a godly life." (Ps 85)**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...

**Be prepared. That's what the Scouts say. And if you ever were a Scout, or a Guide, you will no doubt still have that motto tattooed somewhere beneath your skin, but you don't have to be Baden Powell, or Bear Grylls, to be a believer in preparation.**

**It was Abraham Lincoln who said, "Give me six hours to chop down a tree, and I will spend the first four hours sharpening the axe."**

**And whether you listen to politicians or sports coaches, Louis Pasteur or David Beckham, Oprah Winfrey or Seneca, they will *all* tell you that to 'fail to prepare is to prepare to fail', or words to that effect.**

**Preparation, in short, is everything.**

**But as we enter this season of *Lenten* preparation perhaps we might be forgiven for asking, in so far as we act not as sports stars or nascent celebrities, how exactly we are prepared by denying ourselves pleasure?**

**It is easy to imagine how denying myself chocolate or alcohol might sharpen my body for athletic performance, but what is being whetted by refusing to indulge some aspect of my appetite for 40 days?**

**As St Paul's Epistles make clear, nobody likes exercise or discipline, but what is the purpose of 'pummelling our bodies'? What does it mean to bring them into subjection? After all, in his letters to the Corinthians, Paul is adamant that our worship of the Incarnate God no more consists in a gnostic contempt for the body, than it does in the pursuit of perishable goals.**

**So what *is* our aim? How are we preparing or being prepared? And for what exactly?**

**For a start, despite the constant temptations to ignore Paul's warnings and think "subduing the flesh to the spirit" means decrying the body, there is no implication in the Christian *refusal* of material pleasures by fasting, that there is anything *wrong* with pleasure, nor is there any shortsighted intention to simply repress or remove our desires. The focus is not on refusing the gifts of God, but on refusing to see them as anything less than gift, and so refusing to turn them into possessions by holding on to them.**

**Indeed, whilst the *strength* of human desire may be the heart of the problem for some systems of religion, it is not the focus of scripture's story of our fall, indeed if anything the problem revealed there, and the criticism regularly levelled at God's people by their prophets, is that our desires and our hearts are too *limited*: that we are too prone to settling for a Golden Calf rather than the golden glory of the Tent of Meeting, too quick to settle for the first fruits instead of waiting for the *full* fruits, too lazy or fearful to hold out for freely given love to flower, so that we snatch power or possession in its stead, and try to pretend that the bud is the rose in bloom.**

**As CS Lewis put it : "It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us...we are far too easily pleased."**

**So Lent, with its waiting, and its giving up, certainly offers us an opportunity to see the economy of the Fall reversed, to exchange the half-hearted realm of grasping and having, for the abundant life of gift and love at whose centre stands the Tree we may not take from... And Lent certainly encourages us to exercise the muscles of our hearts - emptying and stretching them, Augustine says - so that they can accommodate the fuller, longer, deeper desires and their fulfilment.**

**But, it is not just a question of settling too soon for petty pleasures, because even though It *doesn't* teach that pleasure is inherently bad for us, and even as it points instead to greater gratification than the instant affords, Lent also, perhaps even more importantly, highlights the fact that there is more than one type of pleasure in the first place.**

**The type that as adults we are most familiar with, the kind we may even think is the only sort available, is pleasure that, by its very definition, comes to an end... that pleasure which exists in a sort of tension, that once resolved, disappears, at least for a time - climactic pleasure which depends on hunger, on an appetite, and which, in the moment of being sated, consumes the desires which created it, so that the objects of our desire move through a rise and fall, of increasing value, followed by temporary worthlessness.**

**This the cycle Eve and Adam chose when they turned love into food, and the cycle familiar to all those who give up chocolate at Lent. I liked chocolate before Lent, I love it in the middle of Lent, I practically live for it by the end of Lent. Then by Easter Monday I could happily never see another piece of chocolate again. At least until the next day...**

**And such is the default mechanism of pleasure for most of us, but the pleasure that is the point of this sort of process is not the *only* kind of pleasure.**

**Once upon a time, in the days of our innocency, we were just as familiar with the kind of pleasure that *doesn't* wax and wane, that *doesn't* end, that *has* no end because it is not climactic. This is the pleasure to be found in the steady gaze of someone who loves you, or in the play of young children. As anyone who's ever said to a playing child "two more minutes then it's bedtime" will tell you, unlike the games of older children and of adults, child's play has no ending. And *in* this characteristic it may have something to tell us about what Lent, and a lifetime of Lents (& Easters), are preparing us for.**

**The 40 days of Lent as our Gospel makes plain, echo Christ's 40 days in the wilderness, but they also, like that period itself, reflect Moses' 40 days of fasting before receiving the Law on Sinai, and Elijah's before encountering the presence of God in the still small voice; as well as the 40 days of rainfall in the flood before the new covenant with Noah, and the Israelites 40 years in the wilderness between slavery and the land of the promise...**

**In other words, the 40 days of Lent reflect a sort of suspense, a gap between what was and what will be, a transitional space, that precedes, and is somehow part of, the shift to an entirely new kind of relating, between God, and the child - or children - of God.**

**And like the transitional spaces in our infancy that are crucial to our development as human beings, like those spaces in which the endless kind of pleasure first exists, like the dynamic space between two individuals in loving relationship, these in-between **ZONES** are characterised by a strange way of being that is neither active nor passive.**

**This is a difficult state for us to grasp because our language, unlike those which include a so-called 'middle voice', only divides itself into passive and active voices, we act or we are acted upon, and our thinking, like our behaviour is similarly inclined; but it is crucially important to notice that, like Noah, Moses and Elijah before him, Jesus *doesn't* 'go' into the wilderness**

he is led, neither on the other hand is he dragged or carried, he is 'led', he actively participates in an action initiated by another... That is what being 'led' is...

And then - inhabiting, abiding in, this 'in-between' space - he finds himself tempted to act, to take action, to be active. "Turn these stones to bread, throw yourself on the protection of the angels". Or to be passive - to cede control to the Devil - "worship me and I will in turn give you power to act as you will".

All of these temptations are rejected in favour of relationship with the Father, in which the Son is never acting of his own accord, nor simply being acted upon. In the end this is what characterises his whole way of being,

A way of being that is without the rise and fall of struggling egos, without the real fear of loss which undergirds so much of our pleasure. A relationship like the one within whose safe confines a child can play with presence and absence.

And *this* is the eternal relationship which we are all invited to enter, the dynamic that we are all called to be part of - a way of being, a love in fact, which is without end, and within which, when something *is* done, it is impossible to say 'I finished it', or 'the Other finished it', but simply 'It is finished'.

In that sense, as we are led into the in-between places of another Lent, we are being invited to put down some of our activity, and some of our passivity, in order to practice inhabiting a space which is neither active nor passive; we are being invited - not to set pleasure aside *per se* - but to let go of our hold, of our control upon it - to set aside those forms of it which by nature come and go, for that which ought always to contain them - the endless pleasure of a relationship of love - in which we continually participate in the loving actions of another, in which we can safely experience both presence and absence, plenty and lack, in which we can be dying and behold we live, as having nothing, and yet possessing all things, and in which we can be prepared for our own Good Friday when it comes...

We think of the wilderness and perhaps of Lent as a place of hunger, a place where we are denied pleasure, a place of frustrated desire, and fruit tantalisingly out of reach...

But the place of fruit we cannot *take* is not the wilderness, but Eden, and Lent, like the penitential aspects of all our worship, is preparing us to inhabit - to abide in - the new paradise, by teaching us how to let go of our grasping and to open our hands to receive, by training us to leave aside Adam's weak *desires*, that turned love into mere food, and take on Christ's *passion* that, in sacrifice and thanksgiving, turns food into love.

We think of the wilderness, and perhaps of Lent as a place of danger, a liminal place where things are undecided - and as there are several aspects to our sinful humanity, that is one part of the picture - but it was not in uncertainty that Jesus entered the desert, rather it was in the confidence of being bathed in, anointed by, and full of, the love of the Father in the Holy Spirit.

So too for us, Lent is a time for being reminded of how trustworthy our Father in Heaven is, of how unfounded the fear is that feeds our grasping, a desert to demonstrate to us again the literally endless stream of love in which our needs and satisfactions, even our deepest ones, are swept up - in which the shallows of our soul can be drowned.

" There's nothing round this spacious earth/  
Suits, in itself, my large desire/  
To boundless joy and solid mirth/  
My nobler thoughts and hopes aspire.  
Where pleasure rolls its living flood/  
Still springing from the throne of God,  
There in the bosom of my Lord/  
Oceans of *endless* pleasure roll  
There would I fix my last abode/  
And drown the shallows of my soul." (adapted from Isaac Watts)

