

Being the Church at Brentwood

Loss and Gain

**Psalm Ps 22:23-31 and Mark 8:31-38
(Hymns – 205, 211, 534, 556)**

**March 4, 2012
(Celebrating the Lord's Supper)**

Lent is a period of 40 days and 40 nights in the Christian year
when traditionally Christians have given something up.

It's often a behavior that is seen as bad for us –
smoking, coffee, sweets, swearing, etc.

It's a tradition most faithfully observed
in the Roman Catholic and Anglican branches of the Christian church,
but Christians of all branches of the church often give something up for Lent.

The origins of the practice lie in Jesus time of temptation in the wilderness.

For 40 days and 40 nights,
he is led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit and tested.

Though the details are not spelled out in Mark's gospel,
Matthew and Luke describe three primary temptations –
security, esteem, and power.

True and lasting security, Jesus tells the Tempter, lies in God's will and words.

True and lasting esteem, Jesus tells the Tempter, lies in God's caring love.

True and lasting power, Jesus tells the Tempter,
lies in worshiping God and serving his kingdom.

What Jesus gave up during that original Lent,
or better yet, what Jesus repented of and resisted during that original Lent,
was the human habit of finding security, esteem, and power
in things different from and lesser than
their relationship with the God.

And, as the passage we read this morning for Mark emphasizes,
it's not just any god or conception of God that we find comfortable or inspiring.

It's the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob;
the God of the Exodus;

the God of the shepherd-king David and the peaceable kingdom of the prophets;
the God who comes as a suffering servant rather than a royal conquerer.

This is the Messiah that God is sending to save the world.

And the passage we read this morning
records God in Jesus Christ
telling us how that is going to happen.

The path is one of being a trouble-maker and a disturber,
of rejection by the religious authorities,
of trial and execution by the political powers,
of an agonizing death on a cross,
and of resurrection three days later.

When Peter heard this, he couldn't take it.
And remember, short verses prior to this,
Peter is the one who proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah!
Mark describes Peter taking Jesus aside and rebuking him.
Peter questioned and criticized
how Jesus understood himself to be the Messiah.
Peter thought it should be different.
For Peter, the Messiah should come in obvious power
to restore the security and well-being of the Jewish people
to re-establish its former esteem and glory,
the esteem and glory it held under the kings, like David.

But Jesus cut him off quickly.
He dismissed these kinds of expectations harshly
as human longings rather than divine revelations.

At the heart of this whole exchange,
as we consider what it is to be the church here at Brentwood,
is the recognition that we need to examine our expectations
of what it means to be the church,
just as Peter had to examine his expectations
of what it meant to be the Messiah.

We have to give up a lot of those expectations.
We have to listen afresh to what Jesus Christ wants us to be,
because the church is his body on earth.
He is our king and head.
Everything we do in faithful flourishing
is his energy and love flowing into the world as a blessing.

If we are going to walk in the way of Jesus Christ,
walk through life with him,
live in this world for him and his kingdom,
be nourished by him at this table,
then we are going to have to give up a lot of expectations
that have nothing to do
with the life of purity, knowledge, patience, and kindness
that we see in Jesus' example and teaching.

That's the key self-examination that honours the tradition of Lent.

Does there need to be a large space with a large number of people in it
to be a successful church?

Jesus wandered around the neighbourhood with 12 disciples
talking about the true sources of security, esteem, and power in human life.
The 12 warmly invited others to join them in listening and learning.
People paid attention and began to follow with them.

And what happens when the real nature and costs of the Gospel
become apparent?

In the original story,
almost everybody, especially Peter,
runs away, hides, cowers in fear, and denies.

Taking on the way of discipleship,
following in the steps of Jesus Christ
to continue his mission and ministry on earth,
is not for the faint of heart or those seeking an easy comfort.

This is tough stuff that demands fundamental changes in our lives.

The kinds of purity, knowledge, patience, and kindness
that offer an authentic Christian witness to the world
come from giving up many of our current attitudes and behaviours
in order to truly follow Jesus Christ.

It all requires intention, attention and disciplined practice
every day of our lives.

This is what Jesus Christ expects his church to be –
a warmly welcoming community of committed disciples
who are nourished in worship, learning, fellowship, and service
to bless the world by the power of God's love
seen most clearly in light of Jesus Christ.

That love speaks directly to our deepest desires for security, esteem and power.

It resonates in our guts.

It warms our hearts.

It enlightens our minds.

It infuses our whole beings, our souls,
with a sense and vision of flourishing humanity.

Lent is the invitation to give up lesser things
and hold fast to this hope for flourishing as the church in Jesus Christ.

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