

As a young Christian I struggled with the whole notion of Lent. I got the bit about it being a time of self-denial; that giving up treats helped people focus more on God and less on themselves. What I was unable to get my head around was the business of growing into holiness.

I don't think that I ever thought that I was perfect or that there wasn't room for improvement. It was just that I couldn't understand how one could do better than one's best.

With the wisdom of hindsight I have come to appreciate that Lent recognizes the ebb and flow of the human condition. We all have times when we are at the peak of our game and times when we are less effective.

Many forces impact on us. These can help us live to our human potential or they can discourage us

and strip away our energy. Some are external. Some are internal.

Among the external concerns are the health of the globe and questions associated with climate change, food security, and the world economy; international tensions in the Middle East, the Korean Peninsula, South East Asia and Africa; the imbalance between rich and poor; and the radicalization of individuals by extremist organizations.

At home we have people recovering from the impact of fire and flood; we face another year of bruising politics in the lead up to the National election. There are concerns about legislative changes that impact on individual freedoms. Many in the church are concerned about the stability of the Anglican Communion and our

divides over sexuality and authority. The Royal Commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse will also have an impact on the life of the church.

There is much more one could say in painting the broad canvas on which you and I seek to live our lives but I hope you get the picture. These factors impact, in ways large and small on us as individuals. Depending on our circumstances and on the circumstances of those who are near and dear to us they will cause us great or little discomfort.

The internal factors that help shape our response to these events are many and varied. They include the way in which we are wired, how we were nurtured, our lived experiences (both positive and negative) and the values we live by.

Life ebbs and flows depending on the external and internal factors of life. The church calendar provides us with opportunities to think about our lives in relation to the events that shaped Jesus life. The forty days of Lent have been used by the church as a period in which candidates were prepared for baptism at Easter.

The baptism of Jesus by John marked the commencement of Jesus' ministry. Baptism is the commencement of a Christian's ministry as a follower of Jesus.

Our practice of baptising infants has somewhat distorted the model but when we think of adult converts to Christianity being covertly prepared for baptism at Easter then an intense period of preparation prior to that starts to make sense.

Christians risked their lives to follow Jesus. Those preparing for baptism were putting their lives on

the line. It was important therefore that the candidates fully grasped what was involved and it was important for the Christian community that they were able to trust the candidates.

Lent became the final stage of preparation for those about to make a commitment at Easter and continues as a stage in which we are invited to revisit our sense of call by God, and our readiness to recommit to ourselves as members of the body of Christ. It is traditional for the congregation to be given an opportunity to renew their baptismal promises during the Easter rite.

In this morning's letter to the Philippians we have Paul encouraging his readers to imitate him in following Christ. He stresses the importance of behaviour, pointing out that some have allowed earthly things to become more important than Jesus.

We also have Jesus being questioned about bad things that happen to innocent people in the gospel story. Firstly it was about Pilate's brutality towards a number of Galileans and then the eighteen killed in the collapse of a tower.

The point of these enquiries was to explore whether Jesus believed that these actions were God's way of punishing sinners? Jesus response was simply to say "no" to the notion that earthly suffering is God's doing.

Jesus does stress however that God expects each person to repent of their sins. This morning's gospel also contains the parable of the man coming to a fig tree looking for fruit and finding none.

He instructed the gardener to cut it down as it was just taking up space that could be used for other more productive purposes. The gardener

interceded on behalf of the tree pleading for time in which he could fertilize the tree thereby giving it a chance to bear fruit.

The point of the story is that God judges humans by the fruit of their lives. Jesus the gardener intercedes for us and empowers us with the Holy Spirit to produce the fruit that only we can bear.

Part of our Lenten reflection therefore is about reflecting on the fruit that we bear in relation to the external canvas I attempted to paint earlier. It's easy for us to throw our hands in the air pointing the finger at others saying, what can I do about;

climate change, food security, the world economy, international tensions, the imbalance between rich and poor, the radicalization of individuals by extremists, individual freedoms, the unity of the

Anglican Communion, and child sexual abuse?

How we are wired, how we were nurtured, our lived experiences and the values we live by will all contribute to the fruit we are capable of producing and the capacity we have to influence the world in which we live.

The point is that through our actions or inactions we all contribute to the peace and security of the world. We all influence one another as Paul suggests.

By taking seriously the issues that appear on our canvas we encourage others to do likewise. This can generate a tide of public opinion and that helps create an environment in which the course of world affairs is impacted.

There are some who see the acceptance of Christ as the end of a Christian's journey. They would

hold that once we accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour that we have somehow entered another state and are free of the clutches of sin.

There are others who see that the acceptance of Jesus as Lord is but the beginning of the journey in which we are fashioned into the likeness of Christ. Our liturgical worship is geared more to this latter understanding than the former.

It acknowledges that we have accepted Jesus as our Lord and saviour. That we have been baptised and that we are serious about serving Christ. It also recognizes that the canvas we are seeking to live our lives on keeps changing. These changes give rise to new and complex challenges.

Who we are and how we respond to life is also complex. Few of us can confidently assert that we know all there is to know about who we are and why we behave in the ways that we do.

Lent then is a bit like an annual car service. The car might be travelling well but with a little tweak here and there and a little bit of refreshment it has the capacity to serve faithfully and well for a very long time. Our spiritual life might be OK but most can benefit from a little reflection and review as we prepare to recommit ourselves in the service of Christ Jesus at Easter.

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