

Since I was young, I have understood Lent in a very particular way. Lent is about making one's life a little less pleasurable, a little less enjoyable by depriving oneself of something one really enjoys. In school or at Catechism classes, we were encouraged to give something up. Maybe it was chocolate for those with a sweet tooth, or potato chips for those (like me) who like to snack, or maybe for the adults, to deprive themselves of their precious coffee. The list could certainly go on. The whole point, though never articulated, was that Lent equalled less pleasure and enjoyment in life. No wonder we would track the season's progress on our calendars – forty, then thirty and finally just ten days left! Thanks be to God! Chocolate, chips, coffee await. I don't think this is the understanding the Church intends with Lent. It may be ok for children but not helpful as we seek to grow in our maturity in our faith. I think it's good to give something up for Lent but the reason we choose a particular thing or behaviour must be clear to our minds and hearts.

Writing 500 years ago, St. Ignatius of Loyola said that,

Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls. The other things on the face of the earth are created for human beings, to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they are created.

Here, in just two lines, we are given our Lenten motivation and focus. Lent, it seems, isn't about making our lives less pleasurable or enjoyable, rather it is, as always, about God. The Church gives us these forty days to focus on the depth of our discipleship. We are not content to be a Christian in name only. We desire and want to be a Christian, a follower of the Lord Jesus, in word and deed. And we desire and want our faith to continuously grow and deepen. We think of the above teaching of St. Ignatius and apply it to Lent. What are those things and behaviours that limit my response to Christ's call of "Follow me"? Can I give something up or change a pattern in my life that makes me more free to be generous in my discipleship? I no longer want to be on the sidelines Lord, or even on the periphery. I want to be beside you and I want you to be beside me. I want the words you spoke to Peter after your Resurrection to be spoken to me: "I tell you most solemnly, when you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and somebody else will put a belt around you and take you where you would rather not go." This is what I want Lord.

Lent isn't about making one's life less pleasurable or enjoyable. It's about gaining freedom to love more and serve more. To follow the Lord more closely. The Church gives us the practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving to help us to be a more loving disciple. Our discipleship is of Him and so we need to converse and be in relationship with Him (prayer). But sinfulness has its claws in us, so we need God's grace to be more free to do what we really want, that is, to follow Christ (fasting). And to follow the Lord more closely is to labour with Him in building the Kingdom of God, to be people of mercy and justice (almsgiving). Lent indeed is a beautiful and holy time. It is about expanding God's goodness within us, of deepening his love in our hearts and of proclaiming him to our world.

God Bless and Take Care,

Fr. John