
Why I Celebrate Lent

by Fr. Jerry A. Cimijotti

On Ash Wednesday, 40 days before Easter (*not counting Sundays*), many Christians will celebrate the beginning of Lent. Celebrate may not be the right word for a season of fasting and sacrifice; perhaps it might be more accurate to say that many Christians will begin their rigorous practice of self-sacrifice and repentance for the Lenten season. Thanks to my devout parents, and the church in which I grew up, Lent has become an important part of my spiritual growth and development. For those who do not observe Lent it can be quite curious to see Christians exchange joy for sorrow; exchange their understanding of forgiveness for a profound understanding of their sinfulness.

As I keep Lent, the answer to my own curiosity is found at the beginning of Scripture. In this season I often find myself meditating on these first few words of the Bible: ***In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. (Genesis 1.1-2).***

Isn't it interesting that God started creation with such an unsightly looking mess? The earth had no shape and was completely empty. It was enveloped in a pitch-black darkness. No shape, no contents, no light. Why didn't He just call into being a beautiful world and be done with it? Why did it take six creation days before God saw that everything He had made was very good? It seems to me that Genesis wants us to remember that God specializes in taking that which is ugly, messy, broken, and unlovely and makes it into something beautiful. He took the initial glob of creation and made the wonderful world we enjoy.

God wants you and I to know that He can do the same with us. This is really what Lent is all about. During these few weeks leading up to Easter we fast, pray, and sacrifice to remind ourselves that first, any serious examination of our lives will reveal that we need to be changed and second, that only God can change us. On our own, we tend to make a mess of our lives, while God (when given the chance) can, and will, make something wonderful of our lives.

The rationale of Lent is that we are imperfect people who can become much better. We are self-centered people who can become more loving; materialistic people who can become more spiritual; hurried people who can become much more peaceful. Better qualities just don't happen; they are worked for, committed to, and sought after. While Christians discipline their bodies for godliness we acknowledge that only God can make the results real. Lent is concerned with the process that makes it possible for God to perform this miracle. The process is through our broken heart. Remember the creation event? God took the unsightly looking mess and made it beautiful. In the same way, it is only when we acknowledge that we are broken that God can fix us. That is why we pray: ***"Heavenly Father, You hate nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of You, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness."***

The Lenten season ends with our celebration of Good Friday and Easter. The knowledge of our sins leads us to the Cross, where our sins caused His death. The Resurrection of Christ reminds us of the power He has to forgive our sins and change our lives into something beautiful. Just like the creation event, God can re-create those who have grown ruinous. If you would like to be one of those people, God is ready to work with you.

*Rend your hearts and not your garments.
Return to the Lord, your God, for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.
Joel 2:13*

*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
Psalm 51:17*

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