

Lent Is Not About Achieving but About Receiving

2 Corinthians 5:20b–21

We gather here on Ash Wednesday at the very beginning of the season of Lent — a special season of preparation for Holy Week. There are many traditions and rituals associated with Lent that were quite foreign to me in my early church life in NZ.

If, as a teen, I had been asked about what I was going to give up for Lent, I would have said that I was neither Catholic or Greek Orthodox. Lutherans are free to pick up, or refrain from, such man-made rituals, and there was some local determination to not act like Catholics. We did, however, have Lenten Bible studies and midweek services/choir rehearsals preparing for Holy Week and Easter.

In Adelaide in the 90's, many people seemed quite aware of the Lenten season, but these days if you hop into a taxi, or an Uber, the discussion is highly unlikely to turn to, "What are you giving up for Lent, mate?" Conversation is more likely to turn to crisis in Ukraine or the floods in Qld/NSW.

The prophet Joel called God's people to repent and return to him. The call to repent is a fitting one for all generations. The shadow of dark minds turned away from God, the rejection of God by this, as with previous generations, and the threat to our faith when attacked by the spirit of this age — we indeed need to repent and to seek God. War images alarm religious people and atheists alike. We should be alert and fully aware that a spiritual war is going on.

In a battle to overcome the enemy, we might be tempted to seek God through personal pious activity in this season. But Jesus warns us in tonight's gospel of Matthew — that even godly activities, expressing faith in God and serving a neighbour, can be misused to promote the self rather than God's righteousness. Prayer, giving to the poor, or fasting can be turned into a shameful display of sinful self-promotion, rather than the genuine seeking of God and his holiness.

There is some danger in taking on the rituals of the Lenten season, for they can easily be mistakenly regarded as a means of gaining merit or favour with God. The intent of these spiritual practices is actually to point to the opposite. We do not need to gain or prove our goodness to anyone, ourselves, our neighbours, and certainly not God by giving of alms, offering up special prayers or meditations, or giving up pleasures or basics of life. God has already given us his favour.

The season of Lent is actually about rediscovering the gift of grace given to sinners, of receiving rather than doing. Even in the giving of alms, and acts of charity, the focus is always on what God has already wonderfully given us.

We have already received the fullness of His grace, and it is not to be exchanged for works-based righteousness. My feeble efforts at holiness and doing good are like filthy rags in the presence of the undeserved grace of God giving me his Son.

Jesus wasn't given as a mere token, an example to follow or inspire us, but given unto death to achieve things impossible for us to earn or achieve — forgiveness of sins, the gift of Holy Spirit transformed hearts, and of new life and salvation, righteousness and status before angels and all creation as children of God.

Misunderstandings about liturgical seasons and spiritual practices in his day had Luther write and proclaim with pastoral concern:

“Lent has become mere mockery because our fasting is a perversion and an institution of man. For although Christ did fast forty days, yet there is no word of his that he requires us to do the same and fast as he did. Indeed, he did many other things, which he wishes us not to do; but whatever he calls us to do or leave undone, we should see to it that we have his Word to support our actions.

But the worst of all is that we have adopted and practiced fasting as a good work: not to bring our flesh into subjection; but, as a meritorious work before God, to atone for our sins and obtain grace. And it is this that has made our fasting a stench and so blasphemous and shameful, so that no drinking and eating, no gluttony and drunkenness, could have been as bad and foul.”

Wow, Luther puts us right without holding back. He says we shouldn’t sweat over good works as something that needs to be achieved. Even good works, done with reluctant compliance to what the law requires, or to impress others, are worthless.

Lent isn’t about achieving. It’s about receiving. If we want to give things up during Lent, it must be for the purpose of drawing us to depend more closely on Christ and his righteousness, of reflecting on our need for Jesus to restore us, to restore our broken relationships, and to reconcile us to God.

God’s spirit enables us to know we are made right with God, and to want to freely respond to his first serving us. This Lenten season, our congregation is entering a season of Service and Mission. This Sunday, March 6, is appointed as a Service Sunday where we will all be encouraged to focus on how we can serve God through our ministries and witness to the world.

Some may pursue a paid role, but for most of us it’s about being willing volunteers, contributing our gifts and time in response to God’s love. We are each a part of St Paul’s shared response to God, serving one another and those around our church and beyond. Witnessing to the truth of God’s love in Jesus Christ for all people.

Tonight marks the beginning of the 40 days of the Lenten season, where the church revisits Jesus’ walk to the Cross and journeys with him on this walk. In this liturgical season, Christians from ancient times received something else — the sign of the Cross marked with ashes on their forehead.

The rite of receiving the mark of ashes is not for the purpose of a self-righteous public display. In fact, it is the opposite. We agree we have no righteousness within ourselves whatsoever. The application of ashes proclaim that we share in the same sinful human nature as Adam and Eve. Just as they were created from dust (ash), to dust they would return. The ashes proclaim to us God’s just sentence of death upon us, and that we too will return to dust.



This rite is called ‘the imposition of ashes’, because the mark is imposed on us; placed upon us from outside of ourselves, not as a reward but because of our need.

In the light of God’s commandments, we all have great need for a Saviour to bring us righteousness before God. We are declared and made righteous only through faith in the righteous Son of God.

Receiving the ashes on our forehead in the shape of a cross proclaims the love and grace God has for us in Christ, and that although we will return to dust, Christ has redeemed us by his holy and precious blood, and washed away all our sin. The sign of the Cross reminds us of the sign of the Cross made on our foreheads at our baptism; the sign that “Christ the crucified has redeemed you” personally.

Through his work and suffering on the cross, Christ has claimed a victory over sin and death. Those remaining in Christ will not be lost to God. When he returns in glory, he will raise us up on the last day, and take us and all his faithful people to share in his glory forever.

The sign of the Cross also reminds us that at the font, we received the redemption and resurrection power of Jesus personally. That same power is at work in us still, leading us to drown the sinful nature each day, and rise to newness of life in Christ, so that we do not receive God’s grace in vain.

May our Lenten rituals and practices serve to reinforce this truth, that the solid ground of Salvation is God’s Grace alone, through Faith alone in Christ alone.

We pray:

Most loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for your amazing grace, giving us freely in Christ that which we could never earn or achieve. Thank you for the gift of Christ’s cross, where he served us, through the rejection and the punishment that we deserved, in order to deliver us from evil. Through his perfect obedience and victory over all wrongs, we have received his righteousness when we had none of our own. By your Holy Spirit, may we live in the fullness of that wonderful everlasting gift, and never trade it for a fleeting worldly reward.

Bless all who serve humbly out of love, graciously within our congregation. Help us to further respond generously within our Season of Service and Mission, with the mission of your gospel reaching the ears and hearts of those who are yet to know your salvation. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Video of the service including the above address: <https://youtu.be/zUX8mGFBOAg>