

Reflection for March

Theme: Lent- A Time of Paradoxes

A Master lived the simplest kind of life in a little hut at the foot of a mountain. One evening, while he was away, a thief sneaked into the hut only to find there was nothing in it to steal. The Master returned and found him. "You have come a long way to visit me," he told the prowler, "and you should not return empty handed. Please take my clothes as a gift." The thief was bewildered, but he took the clothes and ran away. The Master sat naked, watching the moon. "Poor fellow," he mused, " I wish I could give him this beautiful moon."

One wonders what is more strange- that the Master would want to 'give' a thief the Moon when it is, after all, for everyone? Or that, even in his nakedness, there is still more he wants to give? Or that the thief couldn't see the true treasure which made the Master content even in his poverty, and the thief wanting, despite all he was given... Some treasures cannot be stolen; they must be seen and experienced. Perhaps that is what Lent is all about. It is about leaving for a while the things we hanker for and toil over, to notice the true treasure that the naked Christ wants to offer us from the cross- Lent is not about super religiosity but about learning to see the kingdom of God unfold before our very eyes especially when it doesn't appear so, it is learning to want God's greatest treasures- His Love, His Son, His Spirit, His Kingdom, His Will. Perhaps that is why Lent, which some Catholics may consider the 'saddest' season in the Catholic calendar comes in the 'happiest' season of the year- Spring! Thus, in a way, Lent is the time of the year which awakens within us mixed feelings. While it connotes spring-time, it also means 'slowing down'. It also carries with it biblical images of the 'desert' and the number 40. Perhaps it may be a good idea to look at these images a little closer to understand and enter in more meaningfully into the Lenten season.

Spring

Spring brings with the hope that winter finally is over. The fresh grass is sprouting, the new leaves are twitching to show off their colours, the flowers swaying in bloom to the gentle breeze announce – it is spring. There is a lightness in the air and the sky somehow looks a little bluer. While we celebrate the joy of Christmas and Epiphany in the peak of winter (at least in the Northern part of the Globe) new life of spring is connected to Lent. There is a God-paradox here. God works in two levels always, not a split but a harmony, the blending of the opposites in perfect symphony. So here is the invitation for us - not to judge the inside from the outside but rather to carry the opposites in perfect balance. This is a perineal challenge, and the Gospels show us this, the resting Jesus and the violent storm (Mt 8), the tender love of a sinful woman and the callousness of the

disciples (Lk 7:36-50), the agonizing prayer of Jesus at the Gethsemane and the indifferent snoring of the disciples (Mt 26:36-46).

Slow Down

To say we need to 'slow down' is an understatement. It may not be that we are occupied with too much of work or responsibility, though for some that may be the case. But even for those who are not burdened with multiple responsibilities Lent is a good time to slow down. (*Part of the reason why the Master couldn't give the beautiful moon to his nocturnal guest was because he ran away*). Most of us, with the connected world we live in, are constantly 'vibrating at the latest' - be it the ping of a WhatsApp message, or the Breaking News (read distraction) which pops up ever so easily on the screen of our minds. How many times has it happened that we have gone through half of the mass and have no clue what the First Reading or the Gospel was? For that matter - at community prayers or at rosaries, suddenly wondering '*which mysteries of the Rosary are we saying today?*'. We are ever so absent while being present. Is it any wonder that we do not remember half of what people have told us and are pleasantly surprised and sometimes miffed that we were not informed while all along we were just 'absent', preoccupied, as Francis of Assisi sang, with our 'selfish miseries'?

There is an endless chatter in our minds, the running after so many broken strands of thoughts, or 'sipping...' as a friend remarked 'the broth of memories'. Lent is a good time to ground ourselves in the present, for that is really what we have - to be alive, to be aware or as they say, 'to feel the ground beneath our feet' and smell the flowers around.

Desert and 40

The Israelites roamed the wilderness of Sinai for 40 years, a journey that should have taken them two weeks. What is happening here? The starkness of the desert exposes the deepest fault lines and vulnerabilities we have.

The triumph of the crossing of the Red Sea was soon forgotten with the constant murmur of lack, and dryness, the days gone by, even though painful, looked more colourful than the starkness of the desert. Isn't it shocking that out of the 2 million plus people who left Egypt only 2 men from that generation could enter the Land of Promise? Their murmuring, their fretting, their constant dissatisfaction with what was before them, their constant looking back to what they had left behind, ensured that they never finished their journey. What a grave reminder for all of us!

Jesus symbolically spends 40 days in the wilderness, relives the story of Exodus and emerges triumphant in fighting the wild animals (Mk 1) and 'returns in the power of the Spirit'. We are called to relive this experience every Lent.

Stripping away

The desert has a way of exposing everything. The heat and the bareness strips away everything that is non-essential. We are left to keep only that which keeps us alive. Everything cumbersome or everything that hinders our path is consciously dropped, so that life can go on. Lent is exactly meant to do that, strip away what is not needed and drop all that is not required. What are the attitudes that the desert of Lent will bring to the fore? Our disquiet, our irritation, our fault finding, our focus on self-preservation, our need to be thought and well-spoken of, our self-importance or in a word our ego, which we have so carefully cultivated through years of life. It may feel like violence, but this is exactly the type of wild animals that Jesus encountered, and we must too.

Some suggestions-

1. Look into your cupboard and drawers. What are the things that you do not need? Do not hold on to things which you do not use, even for sentimental value. After we die, anyway it will be thrown out, so give it to someone who will love it. e.g. give away the rosaries and holy artifacts which you have which is not used at all. *Warning – You will see some lovely smiles on the faces of the children/people to whom you will give these holy objects.*
2. Smile – try to keep a smile on your face even when no one is watching. Try Smiling (not smirk) when life throws a surprise, an unwanted word, a rude remark, an offensive look. What good is it if you do good to those who do good to you? Remember it is easier to smile than to keep a frown on your face, it takes lesser muscles. *Warning – At the end of Lent you may look younger.*
3. Be intentionally kind- Go out of your way to be kind in words and actions. Practice kindness with your eyes, yes, your read it right – look with kind eyes. It is possible. And top it with a kind word. It may feel like death, but as St. Paul said, ‘we are given over to death ...so that the life of Christ may be revealed in our mortal bodies’(2 Cor 4:11). *Warning – You may make some new friends and you may end up being a kinder person.*
4. Practice the magic words – Look for opportunities to say ‘Sorry’ (please mean it), ‘Please’ (even when you may not have to) and ‘Thank you’ (always). *Warning – The convent may become the heaven you always wanted it to be.*
5. Drop in to the Chapel – Try visiting the Chapel ever so often to say a quick hello to Jesus. *Warning – End of Lent you may look like Him.*
6. Make your own secret list of things you would do this Lent – *Warning - This maybe the best part.*

Have a Blessed Lent!