

How Should I Be Different When Easter Arrives?

In a few minutes we will hear the traditional invitation that marks Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent:

“I invite you therefore, in the name of the Lord, to observe a holy Lent by self-examination, penitence, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, and by reading and meditating on the word of God.” (BAS p282)

I remember being asked in Sunday School what I was giving up for Lent. The response was always “chocolate,” because what else was there for a child to give up. Some others said they would give up soft drinks, but my brothers and I so rarely got offered soft drinks that I was not about to give up my soft drink on one of these rare occasions. The promise to give up chocolate was usually broken by the next Saturday when we went to the corner store to spend some of our allowance. If I was feeling that I should keep my promise at least once then I would buy some other candy rather than my regular chocolate bar. I am pretty sure that I had no idea what the real purpose of Lent was other than being miserable. And what kind of loving God wants us to be miserable.

As an adult I suggested one day to Glenn that I would give up coffee for Lent. He suggested that it would not be good for me, him or the rest of the world if I did that. So much for that experiment.

Over the years, I have given up chocolate, but really there are so many other sweets and dessert available that it turns out to be an inconvenience or annoyance for me, it was not really giving anything of value. Some years I have intentionally read and studied a book of Bible. It is interesting to read a book through from beginning to end rather than the small chunks that we hear on a Sunday morning; it certainly helps give the story some perspective and context, a better understanding of God.

All this had me thinking why we do what we do to mark Lent, why do we choose certain disciplines. Why do we do Lent by giving, fasting or praying?

Is it a sense of duty, because we think that is what God wants us to do?

Is it for approval, to prove to God that we love God?

Is it bargaining, so that God will give me what we want?

Is it ritualistic, or habitual, do we do something, usually the same thing every year, because that is what “good Christians do?”

Somehow that feels like I am bending Lent to my will, I am giving up a treat in order to gain some kind of reward, that I am trying to control or manipulate God, that it is all about me.

Perhaps there is a different way to approach Lent and selecting a Lenten discipline, one that has meaning and purpose, one that helps me connect and relate to God.

Rather than asking “what should I do for Lent?” it might be helpful to pray and ask “Lord, how do you want me to be different when Easter comes?”

Lord, how do you want me to be different? What are you calling me to be. How do you want us to be different? What are you calling us to be?

Up the mountain during the transfiguration we heard as the voice from the cloud says, this is my Son, the beloved, listen to him. Perhaps we should try it?

When we listen to the world around us, particularly the advertising. The world says, prepare for the worst. Secure your borders. Hoard your money and hide it under the bed. Avoid the stranger. Take care of your own and one day he or she will take care of you.

But Jesus has a different story to tell. When we listen to Jesus, Jesus says, prepare for the best. Live expansive lives. Give generously. Engage the stranger. Care for the needy.

It might be beneficial to take a cue from the reading from Joel:

“Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
rend your hearts and not your clothing.” (Joel 2:12-13a)

It is an invitation to turn around, to rearrange our priorities, to focus on what really matters.

It is an invitation to change our hearts.

It is not about longer or more frequent prayers, or prayers with the perfect words. Praying to impress others is, as Jesus says, being like the hypocrites.

Our prayers are not to impress anyone, especially God. At its heart, prayer is simply about connecting with God. Fancy words are not needed.

Pastor Rich Villodas explains it beautifully:

“God does not love you more because you pray a lot. God does not love you less if you pray just a little. God’s love is perfect and unconditional. And the more we pray, the more we know that perfect love.”

Prayer is not about earning God’s love; it is about experiencing it. Prayer changes our hearts.

So, as you ask “Lord, how do you want me to be different when Easter comes?” You may find it helpful to consider these questions.

- What unhealthy patterns do I see in my life during the past year?
- What relationships need reconciliation or my new or renewed investment?
- How can I improve my relationship with God?
- In what ways can I join God in healing and restoring the world?

Be careful, when we ask,

“Lord, how do you want me to be different when Easter comes?”
What are you calling me to be? How do you want us to be different? What are you calling us to be?

Be prepared for your heart to change,
your priorities to shift,
and you focus to move to what is truly important.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Readings: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17