

REFLECTION FOR LENT 2021



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Lent 2021 will be unlike any Lent in living memory – or even beyond. The crisis of the pandemic, enforced isolation, the economic crisis, the food crisis and the right of children to their education means that, willingly or not, we have been driven into a desert and are being forced to realise that “Man does not live by bread alone”.

The three temptations of Jesus in the desert before he undertook his public ministry have always been the framework and pattern of our Lenten exercises. The gospel of Matthew portrays the “gods” of human satisfaction: food, material possessions, power, influence, control. These are the things to be worshipped, the objects of adulation. They take on a whole new meaning when we set them beside the challenges we face as individuals and as a society in discerning our priorities, re-discovering meaning, asking what is of true value in life, particularly during Lent in these COVID 19 times. This year, “The journey out to the desert” may not lead to exotic holidays or sandy beaches, no matter what inducements are offered by travel companies! The journey to the desert within is already being made, not least by those suffering major illness caused by COVID 19. It has certainly been made by the 100.000 people who have died as a result of COVID. The emptiness and sadness in the lives of those who mourn their loss contains its own desert experience of grieving and loss.

The journey into the desert during this time, the journey within, is as significant to those without religious faith as it is to those blessed with that faith. The big questions of life are addressed to us all – made even more poignant by life’s fragility both personally and publicly during this enforced time of pain and suffering. Why are we here? What ultimate meaning does life have? Do we control nature or do we need to care more for it? What constitutes the Good? And what - if anything - will happen after death?

Those questions always bubble away under the surface. Rarely are they addressed because we “do not have the time or space”. This enforced time and space, this enforced desert, has given us plenty of each. Like most desert experiences, it is unwelcome. The radio program “Desert Island Discs” is a graphic reminder of survival without the props we build around ourselves.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers of the early Church realised the physical desert - symbolising the inner desert - was the only “place” to be alone with the self. The only place, ultimately, to be with God.

“Bubbles” are composed not just of human beings – no matter how close the family may be. Bubbles have been created in financial markets, residential and property markets, sky scraping offices, unregulated credit and so much else. Both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have written powerfully on the dangers of exploitation of peoples by market forces and the exploitation of creation itself by the destruction of the natural habitats of the world all in the name of consumption. “Man does not live by bread alone”, particularly when one part of the human population consumes resources at the price of global warming and ecological disaster and to the detriment of their brothers and sisters in the so called “Third World”.

Our society is often spoken of as living in a cultural, social and political desert. This is sometimes illustrated dramatically in violent demonstrations when dialogue breaks down. But social unrest is caused by both poverty and deprivation erupts when violence seems to be the only language listened to. In a cultural desert, the mind begins to burrow deep within itself – just as in an actual desert a human body seeks shelter among the rocks. What a pity the art galleries, concert halls, music venues and even sports facilities are closed – although for understandable reasons. These are places where “Mens Sana in Corpore Sano” are celebrated. A healthy mind in a healthy body.

Thank God, in every sense of those two words, that our churches are now allowed to be open for private prayer and public worship, albeit with severely limiting restrictions. Writing in “The Spectator” recently, Jonathan Beswick described an encounter he would never forget. “As I was walking down the lane outside a church, a neighbour called Steve stopped me and asked whether or not it was true that we had been closed down for public Masses. I replied that it was indeed true. Steve, with the characteristic frankness you would expect of a man who had played several times for Millwall in the 1960’s shook his head sadly and said ‘Either it matters, or it don’t’”.

It is evident that our churches are oases of prayer, peace and contemplation, even when there are no services being held.

The sacred space, the tranquillity, the devotional atmosphere, the signs and symbols surrounding us within them, are gateways to the transcendent. Secular society might describe them as no more than places which are conducive to good mental health. The poet T.S. Eliot uses different words:

You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report.

You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.

(Little Gidding)

The writer and broadcaster Will Self, who describes himself as a non-believer whilst still visiting churches, reflects on secular and aesthetic humanism in a telling way:

“Like the Christianity which it has usurped, aesthetic humanism has a Trinity – albeit one in which paternity is inverted. It is Man who us now the father, and the old Roman goddess Fortuna whom we have made into our own image and likeness. As for the Holy Ghost, what could be more immanent – and yet transcendent- than the internet which is everywhere and nowhere at once, transmitting our divine creative spark?”

LENT

My heart is ready, Yes! My heart is ready!
Like a desert I am parched. My soul of sand
Soaks up the rain at once is dry again, and
The inner fount of life is rank and deadly.
In such abysmal straits, remind the self
That we are loved, for all our self despair;
That Jesus Christ has sought us out, that care
Will open up the inner streams of health.
God's love is real and God's affection never spent.
So, be watered, tended; be refreshed this Lent.

(Archdeacon Harold McDonald 2006)