

Lent

We have now entered the season of Lent and I would like to share with you this poem by the seventeenth century poet Robert Herrick entitled "To keep a true Lent":

Is this a fast, to keep
 The larder lean?
 And clean
From fat of veals and sheep?

Is it to quit the dish
 Of flesh, yet still
 To fill
The platter high with fish?

Is it to fast an hour,
 Or ragg'd to go,
 Or show
A downcast look and sour?

No; 'tis a fast to dole
 Thy sheaf of wheat,
 And meat,
Unto the hungry soul.

It is to fast from strife,
 From old debate
 And hate;
To circumcise thy life.

To show a heart grief-rent;
 To starve thy sin,
 Not bin;
And that's to keep thy Lent.

Despite the seventeenth century language and context I would suggest that this is still good advice for us as we try to observe these coming weeks of Lent. As the poet makes clear it is our attitudes and our behaviour that are important rather than any displays of outward piety. I particularly like the verse in which the poet urges us to "fast from strife, from old debate and hate".

We find the same message made even more explicit in our Bible reading just now from the prophecy of Isaiah (Isaiah 58.6-9a). What God requires from us is to work for justice, to give selflessly to those in need – in short to think primarily of others instead of ourselves.

Those are indeed prerequisites for the work of peace and reconciliation at all levels, internationally, nationally, within communities, and in the realm of individual relationships.

Lent is a time to take stock, to look at our own lives, at our priorities, at our attitudes, at our relationships – and not least our relationship with God. May we grow this Lent in our Christian journey of faith, love and service along the way that leads to peace.

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