



The springtime of the year

Teresa White FCJ

The familiar sights, sounds and practices of Lent help us to integrate faith and life in a prayerful and active way throughout the season, says Sr Teresa White FCJ.

All the major religions expect their adherents to pray, fast and give alms throughout their lives, but there are particular seasons when, through communal rituals, they encourage more intensive prayer, fuller fasting and more generous almsgiving. For Christians, that special time is Lent: 'This is our acceptable time. This is our day of salvation' (Isaiah 49:8). Like Teshuvah in Judaism, Lent lasts forty days, days when we can click the re-set button and return to God. The traditional Lenten practices – spiritual, ascetical and altruistic – are part of our collective quest, as followers of Jesus, to do this. So the Church invites us all to pray, reflect and repent of our waywardness; to simplify our lifestyle by giving up some of our superfluities; and to share our time, money and possessions with people in need.

One Ash Wednesday, when I was about nine, I remember joining the crowd moving up the aisle of our parish church: we were waiting to be 'ashed', to have our foreheads marked with a cross, in charcoal. My mother was in front of me, carrying my two-year-old brother, Paul, in her arms. When the priest raised his black thumb to mark Paul's small forehead, my brother would have none of it: he backed away, waving his arms vigorously. His baby vocabulary was limited, but he made his meaning abundantly clear: 'No, no! Dirty!' I didn't blame him – he didn't like hearing that he was nothing but dirt and dust. Seven years his senior, I found those words unsettling, too...



Photo by Laura Allen via Unsplash

In my post-war London childhood, a degree of rationing continued until I was in my early teens, so families like mine were used to living simply – this was not virtue, just normal life. Even so, each year, we were reminded to make Lenten resolutions, and the list would always include the renunciation of pleasures. For many years, I would 'give up' sweets, and when I was seven, I 'gave up' sugar in my tea, after which I completely

lost my taste for sugar in tea, and have never taken it since! I would also go to the 7am Mass most weekdays, attend the Stations of the Cross once a week, and go to Confession every Saturday. In school, there would be a Lenten drive in aid of [CAFOD](#), so each week I'd give some of my pocket money to the collection. Thus, from an early age, Catholic children of my generation became familiar with the traditional Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsdeeds. To our delight, in Holy Week, there was a little respite from the 'fasting': on Spy Wednesday, we had hot cross buns for tea when we came home from school! Back then, I don't think anyone ever saw those buns outside of Lent, whereas now they seem to be available all year round – which somehow blunts the Good Friday symbolism.

Music is another vivid memory of what to me was a genuinely 'holy' season. In my teens, I belonged to the parish choir, which was run by my father, and I loved the songs and hymns of Lent. Most of them were set

in a minor key, and ‘God of mercy and compassion’ was a special favourite of mine. I liked some of the Latin motets too, especially ‘*Popule meus, quid feci tibi?*’ (the Reproaches), ‘*Crux fidelis*’ and ‘*Si ambulem in medio umbrae mortis*’. Even before I could translate the Latin words, I knew that this was music that nourished the soul – there was sadness in it, yes, but wasn’t there also a hint of joy? ‘*Non timebo mala*’ seemed to suggest there was... Another hymn, ‘O come and mourn with me awhile’, also moved me greatly, especially the second line: ‘See, Mary calls us to her side’. As I sang those words, I felt I was somehow being summoned to share the unimaginable suffering of a mother who sees her son hanging on a cross, bleeding, dying. I knew I wanted to respond.

I think it’s true to say that the word for ‘Lent’ is, in all Latin-based languages, a derivative of forty – recalling the forty days spent by Jesus in the wilderness before beginning his public ministry. (In German, there is no allusion to that number, and Lent is simply called ‘*Fastenzeit*’ – a time of fasting.) Interestingly, unlike those other European languages, the word ‘Lent’ in English has a uniquely seasonal connotation. Derived from an Old English word that means ‘lengthening’, Lent occurs in springtime, when, in the northern hemisphere, the hours of daylight are increasing.

It was only in adult life that I discovered this synonymy, and since then, I’ve been happy to see Lent as a prayerful, reflective journey that takes place against the background of the annual reawakening of the natural world, when plants that died in winter

come to life again. That journey is part of the adventure of life, and it includes giving, giving up and forgiving. Walking through Lent can be tough – we are brought face to face with the suffering and death of Jesus – but trees are coming into leaf, flowers are beginning to blossom, and resurrection and rejoicing are on the near horizon.

In Lent, we are invited to integrate faith and life. As we look at the world today, with its countless problems – our troubled Church, the climate emergency, the slaughter in the Holy Land, in Ukraine and elsewhere, widespread corruption, injustice, and avoidable suffering – we long for a better world, in which God’s presence is honoured, not ignored. The Church proposes three God-centred practices to help us: prayer – listening to God more attentively; fasting – being ready to move out of our comfort zones so as to be more aware of our need of God; and almsdeeds – sharpening our practical concern for God’s favourite people: the poor, the sick, those in any kind of need.

This Lent, every Lent, we are called to conversion, to return to God: ‘Come back to me with all your heart’. To respond to that call may cost ‘not less than everything’, but we know that ‘all shall be well’.

Sister Teresa White belongs to the Faithful Companions of Jesus. A former teacher, she spent many years in the ministry of spirituality at Katherine House, a retreat and conference centre run by her congregation in Salford.