Lent B1 (read only)

Economists have a doctrine called the law of diminishing returns which says that we can try so hard to make something happen that we actually reduce the prospect of getting the best result. Take the simple example of growing crops using fertilizers. There is no need to apply more fertilizer than the crop needs and to do so only adds to the costs of production. Try too hard with the fertilizer and instead of making a bigger profit on the harvest you might find yourself out of pocket due to the fertilizer bill.

If there is one season in the church’s year when we try too hard it is surely Lent. Somehow we have allowed ourselves to take centre stage in what Lent is really about. Lent has become an endurance test; a marathon of self-denial that paradoxically becomes all about us; whether we have the stamina or determination to succeed.

The problem is that after a few years of trying too hard we can become discouraged and weary and so, like those who fall by the wayside with New Year resolutions, Lent becomes a time for rueful surrender. We give up giving up, and feel guilty.

Of course some would have us think that feeling guilty is also what Lent is about.

We hear the word repent and immediately think about sinful actions and lustful thoughts of all kinds. It is as if the most important thing to do in Lent is to somehow overcome human frailty by our own Herculean efforts.

If on the other hand we listen more carefully to the context in which we are called to repent our Lent might have a different focus and release us from the tyranny of self-achievement.

Mark tells us that Jesus is preaching the Good News – we also hear Jesus’ assurance that the kingdom of God is close at hand. Something truly wonderful is made available to us but we cannot quite perceive or receive it.

So Jesus then offers a two pronged key to awareness – we need both to repent AND believe the Good News.

Might it be that the thing we need to repent of and let go is any image of God that holds us back from embracing the Good News.

The Brazilian poet and thinker Rubem Alves created his own parable to get this message across. It is the story of a beautiful garden inhabited by a kindly and compassionate gardener. A garden that was full of delights and that was kept open for all to enjoy. It was a real paradise, a place of happiness for all. Rubem describes the gardener as an old man who *“loved all creatures; there was always a tender smile on his face. If one paid a bit of attention, one could see that there were deep scars on his legs and hands. It is said that, on a certain day, he saw a child being attacked by a wild dog, and he fought the dog. That’s how he got his scars”.* People noticed that when the evening came the old gardener retreated to the wild forest beyond the garden. Some speculated that when he went there he changed into something like a werewolf and presided over a torture chamber and prison for people he didn’t like. Others disputed these allegations and said they only existed in the minds of those who couldn’t believe that the old man was kind and compassionate all the time.

Rubem Alves’ parable invites us to consider whether the thing we most need to repent of is a schizophrenic image of God. As if God could be both lover and monster. Perhaps this Lent as we listen to the scriptures we will begin to paint a better picture of God for ourselves. As the various Old Testament readings uncover the God who makes and renews covenants with us, we will be blessed if we can begin to realise that these covenants are God’s way of reaching out to us again and again.

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