

We seem to have gone from Christmas to Lent within no time at all, so after all the over-indulgences of Christmas, we now decide what to give up for Lent. Every year I have to smile to myself over the number of people who tell me what they are giving up for Lent but they have never set foot inside a church, no matter how many times I invite them. At least it gives me the opportunity to talk about faith with them.

Personally, rather than giving up something I think is a treat, I prefer to follow the words of Pope Francis:

Fast from hurting words and say kind words.  
Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.  
Fast from anger and be filled with patience.  
Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.  
Fast from worries and have trust in God.  
Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.  
Fast from pressures and be prayerful.  
Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.  
Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.  
Fast from grudges and be reconciled.  
Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

I suppose all these can come under the one word – repent.

There are times when scripture seems to run on and on to make a single point. This week's gospel is not one of those times. Mark lumps together Jesus' baptism, his time in the wilderness and his temptation – as if it were all just a speed bump – five verses are all he gives to what many of us would see as a time in Jesus life where we can relate to him most. Why didn't Mark explain it a bit more? Why didn't he tell us more of what Jesus experienced? I don't know.

It is rapid fire, brief and to the point... going from zero to sixty in a single line: *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.* Every phrase, every word packs a powerful message: Get ready. The Christ has come. He calls us to eternal life.

*Repent* is the operative word for this First Sunday in Lent. Repent, here, I believe, does not mean breast-beating and lamentation. I believe it means to re-think; to put some quiet time aside; to stop; to interrupt our routines; to re-assess and adjust our priorities and our behaviour. Jesus understands our natures.

He knows we are a bundle of reflexes and instincts. He knows that we constantly need to reorder our lives to bring them in line with God's plan for us. He knows we must constantly repent to get ourselves right with God. That's why we have Lent.

As we begin this season of repentance, we are reminded that our forgiveness is conditional. It depends on our capacity and our willingness to forgive... to purge ourselves of grudges, resentments, hatreds... the poisons that destroy families, friendships, communities, nations.

I wonder how many of us forgive but never forget? How many insults are still fresh in our minds? How many wounds do we carry around with us waiting for payback time? What a burden. What a waste. Hate harms the hated, but it destroys the hater. Failure to forgive makes us slaves to the past and blind to the future.

When I worked as a hospice chaplain I heard many stories, one from a woman who was in the hospice for end of life support and estranged from her sister because of something that happened years before.

She knew she was dying and talked to me about her sister and how she was finally ready to stop nursing the grudge she had for all those years. She was ready to make amends. We prayed together about it and she cried because it hurt – not only to let the grudge go, but because she realized all the years and energy that had been wasted in maintaining that anger. And how much she had missed in not sharing that time with her sister.

When she was able to repent for her part in the estrangement, she was finally healed. She felt wholeness, even though her body was still sick. She felt right with God and restored to the community that she longed for. I'm sure we could all quote such a story from friends and family but what a shame she couldn't have realised it sooner.

To jump start Lent... to repent... we must clean out our spiritual attics and basements. We must dump the spiteful junk that has been piling up... reminding us of past slights and festering humiliations. We must let in the fresh air and the sunlight of grace. We must forgive.

Then see what a difference it makes... to be refreshed and renewed... to confidently await the coming of the risen Christ.

From the time of Abraham, the chosen people had also waited for the Christ... for the Messiah... *for the kingdom of God*. They were not quite sure what that meant; but they knew that God had something big in store for them. Then Jesus comes along and tells them that their time of waiting is at an end. He is the Messiah... the Promised One of God.

Doubtless, he is not what they expected. But God knew better. The kingdom he promised was not a triumphant warrior kingdom. It was not a feudal system where one neighbour gets to lord it over other neighbours. It is a kingdom of love. It is a family where we all have equal access to our loving God and we all share a responsibility to love each other.

That the kingdom was and is *near* has sparked two millennia of speculation; little of it very productive. I find it more useful to frame the concept of *near* in terms of spiritual and psychic proximity rather than as a fixed position on a man-made timeline.

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In Christ we have Emmanuel... God with us, not just while he walked the earth, but as he promised... with us to the ending of the world. In Christ, God is not remote, not unapproachable. He is a palpable presence in our lives. He is *near*.

The mystery of the Trinity also begins to take shape in these brief lines from Mark. Later in Acts and in the Epistles, the *Spirit* will come to the fore. But here, we are only briefly introduced to the *Spirit*, urging Jesus into the desert to be tempered by solitude, sacrifice and temptation for forty days. All of which brings us quickly back to this jump start for Lent.

These are precious days. Let's not waste them. Repent. Banish hatred and rejoice in the relief that brings. For the next forty days let's live his kingdom. Share his love. Spread his good news. It is Lent and Jesus is *near*. Let's run to meet him.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, send your Holy Spirit upon us to guide us through this season of Lent. Help us to let go of grudges, to repent, and believe that love is all that matters – as you forgive us and love us unconditionally. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Sermon given by Revd. Nicki McNelly