

Lent 2017

These daily readings by Laurence Freeman, a Benedictine monk and Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation, are to help those following them make a better Lent. This is a set time and preparation for Easter, during which special attention is given to prayer, extra generosity to others and self-control. It is customary to give something up, or restrain your use of something but also to do something additional that will benefit you spiritually and simplify you. Running through these readings will be an encouragement to start to make meditation a daily practice or, if it already is, then to deepen it by preparing for the times of meditation more carefully. The morning and evening meditations then become the true spiritual centre of your day. Here is the tradition, a very simple way of meditation, that we teach:

Sit down, Sit still with your back straight. Close your eyes lightly. Breathe normally. Silently, interiorly begin to repeat a single word, or manta. We recommend the ancient prayer phrase 'maranatha'. It is Aramaic (the language of Jesus) for 'Come Lord', but do not think of its meaning. The purpose of the mantra is to lay aside all thoughts, good, bad, indifferent together with images, plans, memories and fantasies. Say the word as four equal syllables: *ma ran a tha*. Listen to it as you repeat it and keep returning to it when you become distracted. Meditate for about twenty minutes each morning and evening. Meditating with others, as in a weekly group, is very helpful to developing this practice as part of your daily life. Visit the community's website for further help and inspiration: wccm.org

Ash Wednesday

Today, with the gritty feel of ash on your forehead, (that is, if you like the ritual, or in a more conceptual mood if you don't), we begin a journey. If you would like to receive the ashes today but don't have time to go to a church, or if you don't like church, ask a friend to put it on your forehead. They can do it with the sign of the cross and a few words. 'Remember you are dust and unto dust you will return'. Or, a little less starkly but no less radically, 'Turn around and live the gospel'.

The journey is the thing, not the way you begin it. It is a journey of forty days, a number which symbolises many things – a time of transition, correction, purification. According to the Talmud at the age of 40 one becomes capable of another level of wisdom. The forty days before Yom Kippur are seen as a special time for personal growth.

First, decide if you really want to make this journey. As with starting to meditate, just decide if you want to begin, without worrying about whether you will finish it. Spiritually, there are no winners of the race, only those who kept going. And those who dropped by the wayside eventually get carried the rest of the way. The universe is friendly to all, in the end.

You may enter this season of Lent with a sense that you are in a bit of a mess and that you need to be re-balanced and to shed unnecessary inner baggage, attachments, addictions, regret, guilt, anxiety. It's enough to know this is possible and that there is a plan for achieving it. Or you may feel balanced enough to know that you still have a long way to go. So you can start this year's journey with the positive intention to go into deeper self-knowledge and brighter clarity.

Any journey can begin with a mixture of intentions and motives. These may then change, as you change, into a pilgrimage (no goal except that of arriving) or a dive from the world's highest cliff-edge into a sparkling blue sea (the arriving is in the travelling). The ash is a reminder that despite our complexity we have a radically simple core. Our common mortality reminds us of this as an opportunity for heightened realism and relish for life rather than fear and neurosis. As the ash is an outward sign, saying the mantra is an interior sacramental. They are acts that allow us to stop thinking about it all and to be one with it all.

The desert that Jesus entered for his forty days is our template for Lent. He was 'led' there. On this journey we don't so much choose as consent. He was 'tempted'. If we aren't tested we remain blocked by our limitations, seeing ourselves as frustrated rather renewable beings.

Why doesn't everyone jump on this interesting band-wagon and make this journey? Because the way is poverty. Detachment and simplification. This scares us because we fear we may end by having nothing. Actually, that truly *is* the goal. Let's not follow the perverse gospel of prosperity and success. If that fake news, that is not good news, becomes our way, well, forty days later we will find that we haven't even left base. The goal (after forty days of variable length) is that we desire not to have possessions with just the same fervour as people generally desire to have them. This poverty is the meaning of freedom. It is meditation. It is the journey into the desert.

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Let's recall the archetype of Lent we are being nourished by on this journey, which is the time Jesus spent fasting in the wilderness.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted¹ by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'"

When you are truly attentive to something, fully absorbed in it, you are not distracted by anything as minor as not having eaten for forty days. To be fully absorbed in anything is a form of bliss. If on the other hand we are constantly snacking, consuming, digesting or spewing texts, twitters and emails we may well forget what a great sauce hunger is. I am not referring to the hunger for the necessities of life, which it is a scandal and shame that anyone should have to face. I mean the hunger for reality that our addictive consumption blocks and denies. The sign of over-consumption is a lack of compassion for the needs of others.

In a world of Brexit and Twitter politics the only certainty is uncertainty. This makes the financial masters of the universe tremble because growth depends on investment and risk is the great fear. So, this is the time to wonder if we have to turn every stone in our path into a loaf of bread and jam.

Life is growth and change. Tradition serves life, it doesn't stifle it. Goals and objectives for growth need to be tempered and trained by the filaments of meaning and wisdom that connect us to our roots, both historically and spiritually. The 'tempter' breaks those filaments by awaking the perennial seeds of greed and lust. Soon we are running crazily around the desert, turning every stone into an unnecessary loaf of bread. We can't consume them all, which frustrates us, but we have also lost the hunger for truth that makes bread meaningful and enjoyable.

If a country decides it has to go to war it should declare its war aims and stop when they are achieved. If the globalized world is aiming at economic growth it should declare its goals, how it can be distributed and its limits. Unlimited growth is cancer.

Moderation really cures. The middle way of the Buddha or St Benedict, the 'narrow little path' of Jesus that 'leads to life' is the journey. The hunger for reality also comprehends hunger for truth. As Orwell foresaw, and Goebbels proved, truth can be altered by manipulation. 'Alternative facts', or lies, can be thrown into the innocent eyes of any sincere

statement. As espionage agents are said to discover after they have learned their craft of deception, it is soon hard to tell what side you are really serving.

When we feel the hunger for reality, we taste the word of God. Yesterday's ash may have disappeared but the journey has begun. Each time we meditate we repeat Jesus' response to the powers of self-deception.

Friday after Ash Wednesday

The journey of forty days begins afresh, from the beginning, every day. All achievements or failures are deleted or become unimportant archives in the story of the self. Not that what happened yesterday doesn't count for anything. It does. But its meaning is only understood when we view it with the eyes of mercy and humour. The self-important judging and condemnation, the praising, self-preening and nasty blaming of the ego, have no connection with the reality of how the past becomes the present. The temptation to turn stones into bread is greed. Today's temptation that we will encounter on this journey, as Jesus did before us, is vanity and pride.

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"¹ Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"²

Many a successful project has collapsed because of a last but quite unnecessary burst of egotistical pride. Over-reaching oneself. Testing to see just how omnipotent is your power over others. It's the gambler's last hand with which they put everything on the next throw of the dice, torn between hoping to win and hoping to lose. Every temple of the ego is destabilized by the desire to test its stability and the feeling that one's acclaimed achievement might actually be illegitimate. Putting God to the test is self-destruction.

Jesus wasn't tempted by bread. But the highest pinnacle of the holy city and its greatest religious ego-construction could be the downfall of any ascetic close to the end of their forty days. The devil quoting scripture happens whenever we twist the truth in our self-deluded minds in order to install the ego where God should be.

And where should God be? At the summit of our 'value-system'? That would be no more than the strange little god of fundamentalism or superstition.

The word 'templum' originally meant *not* the structure we build – St Peter's, the Abbey, the Ka'aba, the White House. It meant the empty *space* of worship. In meditation we acknowledge the unstructured, wholly simply, nature of God. If we can stand on it and look down on everything, it isn't God.

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

Scriptures invite a literary interpretation not a literal one. The literal is easy because it shows everything as two-dimensional, right and wrong being the two most popular dimensions for people whose religion is a firewall against God rather than a way of worshipping. Eventually, in two-dimensional reality, you don't need God at all, just the scriptures and the man-made rules invented to define and defend your interpretations. But the forty-day journey teases this religion apart, allowing the dimension of transcendence to escape.

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"⁶¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

The third temptation is the big one, not greed or vanity but naked egotism. In political terms this is the difference between a society built on self-serving corruption, or on an honours-based power system, and one revolving around a demagogue whose narcissism enthralled or covers any ego weaker than itself. This is the brute ego, secretly wounded as any bully is, exposed in a flash of evil that is the more frightening because from one angle it is so ridiculous.

Meditation is the journey of the forty-days in the desert that gets us securely positioned in this angle where we can see the utter vacuousness of the ego. Then something moving and utterly tender can happen. The dark satanic ego crumbles and good angels are set free. These are no longer twisted in the crystallised forces of self-centredness. They run around unleashed, looking for good things to do, griefs to console, people to listen to, hungry mouths to feed, lonely souls to bring into community.

When you see these things happening anywhere in daily life – a small act of kindness on the subway, a smile where you expected a stare, another second chance - you feel you see a force at work. It is greater than the visible agents who are performing them. Yet there is no visible messenger (the meaning of *angelos* is 'messenger'). There is only the primary, perennial message of human kindness being transmitted from one person to another.

So the devil left him, to return at a later time, St Luke's gospel ominously remarks. But before that happens... we know the tests we should be on the watch for in the coming days.