

Lent exposes my character flaws

A few weeks ago on Shrove Tuesday I spent the evening with friends entering into the age-old tradition of eating pancakes. Being somewhat ignorant of this annual ritual, I asked one of my friends what Shrove Tuesday is all about and why we eat pancakes to commemorate it. When he told me that it is about a clearing out, a time of preparing for Easter, I was struck by the realisation that if I'm going to be enjoying my fill of pancakes, it would also show some integrity on my part to give up something for Lent. So I went home and told my wife that I thought I might give up chocolate.

In her great wisdom she suggested that I give up cheese and cordial as well, both of which I love and have at my disposal pretty much whenever I like. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, my emotional response was one of resentment and defensiveness. I didn't want to give up cheese and cordial as well, and I especially didn't want it to be her to suggest it to me. And therein lies my problem. This was all about me. In an instant I had forgotten that Lent is a time of giving up, whereas I was just thinking of what I could keep. There is something about Lent that exposes my character flaws. It convicts me of my true nature and reveals how attached I am to the superficial - to that which I can really do without for a time. Jesus said 'where your treasure lies, there your heart will be also'. How true that attitude was for me in front of my wife that night, exposed in all its ugliness. What makes it worse is that I work for an organisation that exists to alleviate global poverty and the structures that keep it in place. I am regularly reminded of the fact that close to 30,000 children will die today because of what Bono rightly calls 'stupid poverty'. And here I was becoming irritated when my wife suggests that I give up a bit of cheese and cordial for 40 days.

Lent shows me again that I need something or Someone greater than me to bring me back to wholeness. Left to my own devices, my self-centred attitudes which often manifest themselves in such trivial matters as whether or not I will give up a few items of food will become further entrenched. And little by little, my heart will grow harder. I'm thankful for Lent, for this season when we come to celebrate God Incarnate - coming down to die, to save us from ourselves.

by Nils von Kalm
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