

Why I Observe Lent (And Think Everyone Should Too!)

Wednesday, February 21, is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Season of Lent. During this season Christians have traditionally focused on the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem where he suffered and died. They have sought to ponder the depth of the sin-problem — their own and the world's — that made Jesus' suffering necessary. Moreover, they have resolved anew not only to appreciate Jesus' suffering, but also to appropriate grace so that His suffering on their behalf will not be in vain. Finally, they have said "Yes" to Jesus' call to deny self, take up the cross, and follow Jesus in costly obedience. Despite the abuses and distortions that have sometimes occurred in Lenten practices, I feel compelled to observe the Lenten season. Here are three of the reasons.

First, devout Christians throughout two millennia have observed Lent to their eternal wellbeing. Protestants have often noted abuses and excesses among some branches of the Christian church. Yet, on the whole the Christian church has found this season helpful in forming mature disciples of Jesus. One should hesitate to dismiss what the whole church has found helpful.

Second, earnest Christians never get beyond the cross of Jesus and the call to bear the cross. Thus, on a regular basis we should embrace opportunities to ponder the meaning of the cross, appropriate its grace, and renew our obedience. Of course, we don't **have** to observe Lent to accomplish this, if we are otherwise highly disciplined. Most of us, however (I as much as any), find help in establishing regular seasons during which we attend to the most urgent priorities.

Third, some may protest that Lenten observance could narrow our focus **only** to the cross and make us forget or downplay resurrection reality. "Jesus is no longer on the cross. He is the **risen** Lord," we affirm. Indeed we do. But let us remember that the new life is none other than the life of Jesus in the gospels. None other than the life that came not to be served, but to serve, even if that leads to suffering, the life that blesses even those who persecute and curse, the life that seeks an end to the cycles of vengeance and violence by sometimes absorbing their pain. In other words, the new life resurrection power makes possible is the very life of Jesus, which becomes the focus of proper Lenten observance.

Praise the Lord that Good Friday's death yields to Easter's Life. But if it's truly the Jesus-life we're after, then the season of Lent offers a powerful opportunity to enter that life more deeply.