

Sermon 18 February 2018 First Sunday in Lent

So Lent is under way and traditionally it is a time when we give something up, sacrifice something that we are perhaps better off without. How many of you have made a vow to give something up for Lent? It can be a bit like New Year resolutions – great intentions that don't quite last the distance.

There is the story of a woman who walked into a doughnut shop and ordered three rounds of hot chocolate and three chocolate eclairs, and finished them all. The server didn't think anything of it until the woman appeared again the following day at the same time and then the next day and so on for several weeks.

Finally, the server's curiosity got the better of him. When the woman walked in next time and ordered three hot chocolates and three chocolate eclairs, he introduced himself, 'My name is John' he said, 'and what is yours?' 'Sue Smith' she said. 'Would you please tell me why you always order the same food and the same drink each day?' the server asked. 'I'm really curious.'

'Well, you see, my two sisters and I were always close, but now our work has taken us to different parts of the world,' she replied. 'This is sort of a family thing where we promised to eat and drink to on another every day until we meet again.'

The server thought that was admirable and told her so. Several weeks passed. Then, one day, the woman walked in and ordered one less round than usual, two instead of three. The server naturally thought something had happened to one of the sisters. 'I am so sorry', he said, 'how did it happen?'

'How did what happen?' she said.

'That you lost your sister.'

'Who said anything about losing a sister? I gave up chocolate for Lent!'

Anyway, the focus word for Lent is 'repent'. Now repent is a word that is widely misunderstood. The Greek word used here is *metanoia*, which literally means 'a change of mind.' So to repent means to change your mind, or your mindset. In other words, to change your attitudes or the way you look at things. A modern phrase we could use here is 'Get real'. Get real means 'to wake up to the reality of a situation'.

When Jesus tells us to repent, he doesn't want us to go around wracked with guilt, but rather to evaluate and to get real about our relationship with ourselves, with others and with God. This triangle of relationships lies at the heart of our ability to live whole and fulsome lives. Get these three relationships right and we are well on the way to being the sort of people God wants us to be.

Firstly, we need to get real about ourselves. We are not perfect, we make mistakes, we have our faults. That is fine, that is about being human. But we do need to recognise that, and that recognition leads to a dependence on God, because it is in God's love, as expressed in and through Jesus that we receive that forgiveness which affirms us as loveable and fulfilled human beings. There is a strong element of humility involved, and humility enhances the mana of a person.

Secondly, we need to get real about our relationship with others. We need to have an attitude of love and service to others, especially if they are different to us or are disadvantaged in any way. If we are unable to reach out to others and spread a little love and kindness around, I don't believe we can ever be happy and satisfied. Our fulfillment does not lie with what we can do for ourselves, it lies completely with what we can do for others.

And thirdly, we need to get real about our relationship with God. I go back to what I was saying about the recognition of our humanness leading to a dependence on God. The good news is that God wants us to have that relationship with him, the not so good news is that the ball is in our court. The responsibility lies with us. It won't just happen – we have to make it happen. God will not impose himself. We have that freedom of choice which is vital. It means we have to work hard in order to

create an awareness of God and therefore a relationship with God. And that's what makes it so meaningful.

I have made the point that repentance and a relationship with God are inextricably tied up together. I have here a cake of soap. I am sure you have all had some sort of contact with one of these at some stage today. The soap ads make all sorts of claims about beauty, fragrance etc, but the main purpose of soap is to make us clean, and by that we mean on the outside.

But what about on the inside? After all, that's just as important as the outside, arguably more important. Well the only way to do is to acknowledge our uncleanness to God and ask him to do the cleansing. This bar of soap is useless if it remains wrapped up. Unwrap it and we can go about some cleaning of our exterior.

In the same way, we need to open ourselves to God so he can use his soap on us and go about some cleaning. Lent is a time when we can focus on opening ourselves to God.

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