

Appropriate Misery
Ash Wednesday
A Catechetical Homily

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Since I was not raised in any liturgical tradition, I missed out on eighteen Lents. When I was in fourth or fifth grade, I remember once the parent of a classmate asking me if I was going to get ashes. My father was the pastor of the Evangelical church that ran the school I attended, and the woman simply assumed it had some liturgical traditions. I'd never heard of Ash Wednesday and told her I had no idea what she was talking about. She then explained the custom, and it really interested me that other Christians did this. I wondered why we didn't. I don't recall ever asking my father about it, though.

My first Lent was thirty years ago, and twenty of those have been spent as a priest. But because I came to Anglicanism in my late teens, I very much felt that I had missed out on an important aspect of my formation as a Christian. (I felt the same way about Advent, for different reasons.) When it came to Lent, I didn't exactly know how to approach it. And I must say, that sense of being a newcomer to Lent has stayed with me for three decades now. Always I begin anew.

The upside is that I don't have any traumatic baggage associated with Lent from my childhood, of being deprived and forced to fast and go to Confession, the sorts of memories that many of my friends and parishioners who were raised Roman Catholic have often related to me.

The downside is I'm always at a bit of a loss as to what constitutes a "Holy Lent" for me personally. Don't get me wrong, I know the drill, as they say: prayer, fasting, almsgiving, all of which I've already written on in the *Thurible*. But what is a Holy Lent?

A retired bishop once signed off on an email to me by writing, "I hope you are having an appropriately miserable Lent." I very much appreciated the humour, as one can't rightly wish someone a "Happy Lent" or a "Happy Ash Wednesday" or "Happy Good Friday." We're not supposed to be "happy." But we're not exactly supposed to be downright miserable, either. So "appropriately miserable" strikes just the right tone, I think.

What do you think an "appropriately miserable" Lent would be for you? Before any of us can answer that, I suppose we should ask: What is Lent for; what is its purpose? We all know it's a season of penitence observed in preparation for the proper observance of the great events of Holy Week and a prelude to the joy that awaits us in Eastertide. But on a personal level, what is Lent supposed to *do* to us?

Speaking personally, an appropriately miserable Lent for me is one in which I am no longer by default the centre of my own universe. This is one reason why I have given up Facebook for Lent this year. My carefully curated image as a wise yet humourous priest, and a good father and husband, while of course true in every respect, tends to crop out the uglier, sadder parts of life. It elides the

conflicts with others and inner turmoil that we all deal with at least from time to time. My social media image smooths over the rough edges of my personality and sweeps the detritus of my soul under the carpet. In other words, what I present to the world (and to myself) is a false idol. Facebook feeds on and magnifies my egocentricity. It is where I go when I want to feel affirmed and admired. As if I don't get enough of that already in my daily life.

An idol is anything that distracts us from God. If God is the source and summit of all truth, beauty, and goodness, then it's safe to say that there are precisely *three* types of idolatry: the idolatry of lesser truths, the idolatry of lesser beauties, and the idolatry of lesser goods. We think some things will give us more power than God is willing to give us. We think some things will make us happier than God is willing to make us. And we think some things will make us better people than God is willing to make us. Whenever we want to be in control, or feel loved, or feel superior to others, we fall into idolatry. And we usually do this by relying on things that give us a false sense of control, love, or superiority. And while Facebook does many wonderful things in keeping people connected and can be a powerful tool for ministry, its shadow side is custom built for making people feel powerful, lovable, or superior, if only for a minute or two at a time.

Giving up our favourite idolatries will guarantee that we will be appropriately miserable. I snapped some photos of our new puppy this morning and immediately wanted to post them. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, but by simply giving up my usual mode of doing things so that they (and I) may be admired by others, it forced me to be more present in the moment. This can be an utter joy, when we realize what we've been missing out on by not being present with the people right there in front of you. But it will also make us appropriately miserable because it cuts off a little rivulet of selfish pleasure.

And this is where we get to the heart of what it is to be appropriately miserable: We deny ourselves as many selfish pleasures as we usually indulge in, and we find that we must turn to some other source for comfort, affirmation, love, and power. And we are forced to confront the fact that it's a good thing that we are less powerful than we want to be, and less superior, because we would be even more insufferable at our worst than we already are. But more than that, denying ourselves reminds us that the truest and best source of every good gift is God.

When we remember that God is the source and summit of all that is true, beautiful, and good, the desire to feel more lovable is revealed as a fallacy, for no one can love us better than God does. We may want to feel more pleasure than prayer appears to be able to offer us, but love is not about pleasure. It's about relationship. And relationships entail commitment.

This is where God's loving commitment to us in Christ comes into play. Sometimes, it takes becoming appropriately miserable to realize that what makes us truly miserable is our lack of a deeper relationship with Jesus, and the fact that we are never as committed to that relationship as Christ is. In this light, we can enter into the observances of Holy Week and Easter with our eyes wide open, so that when the Light of Christ is kindled in the darkness, we are ready to behold that Light in all its splendour.

And so, my dear friends in Christ, may you have an appropriately miserable Lent. For through the disciplines of this holy season we are invited to abandon our lesser loves so that we might know more intensely that greatest of all Lovers. Appropriate misery is the misery of the one who is smitten with Love and pines away for the presence of the Beloved. In this regard, may we be truly, appropriately miserable this Lent.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.