

LENT AND COVID-19
by Rob Taylor, April 2020

I have recently read two articles one by N. T. Wright and the other by Mike Mason. These are two men who, over the years, have shaped and enriched my thinking on a wide variety of matters relating to the Christian Faith. In this instance, both of them have noted that the world impact of COVID-19 has coincided almost exactly with Lent.

Traditionally Lent is the season of giving things up as a form of fast. Well, this year the decision has been dramatically taken out of our hands and we are having to give up a lot more than we bargained for! Lent, isn't just a season of self-denial, it is also a season when we take to heart afresh Jesus' call to us to "take up our cross" and journey with him to Calvary.

The COVID-19 virus has plunged the world into something akin to a global war. Reflecting on this Mike Mason writes,

This is not—or should not be—news to Christians. For those of us who side with a disgraced, crucified rebel, we are always at war, and the present situation is merely another instance of this, another battle, albeit a dramatically blatant manifestation of the ever-present, hidden conflict. The fact that our enemy in this case is so covert, operating so perfidiously under the radar, only underlines the situation in which Christians always find themselves, struggling to the death against an invisible, lethal, utterly unprincipled foe.

This is what drove Jesus into the wilderness for forty days, deliberately to flush out the Devil, calling him into the open to confront him. Or rather, to allow Himself to be confronted. For Christians do not fight evil aggressively, as in worldly warfare, but instead we counter evil's aggression with the only weapon we have: the Spirit-filled Word of God.

Easter is the time when, traditionally, we renew the promises of our baptism, with the commitment to "fight valiantly under the banner of Christ against sin, the world and the devil, and continue his faithful soldier and servant to the end of your life." Spiritual warfare is writ large in the "sign-up contract", so to speak.

The restrictions and hardships that mark these days and which will impact the future in ways we have yet to fully see, are an affront to a world that is committed to comfort and control. These are precisely the idolatrous strongholds Lent calls us to grapple with. This is why Jesus went into the wilderness and faced the full power of Satan's temptation to build his kingdom around self. This year, not only Christians, but everyone is being summoned away from their petty pleasures and distractions into the wilderness to face things we have been trying to avoid.

Mike Mason has this to say,

Lent, this wilderness season, is a gift. Among all the conflicting feelings we may have about Covid-19, perhaps one feeling we might consider indulging is gratitude. Gratitude that for once

the world has knowingly been driven into the wilderness with us, and for once is having to wake up and fight a battle that for Christians is (or again, should be) business as usual. For once the world is being called into an acute awareness of the brevity and preciousness of human life and of the sentence of death that continually hangs over us all. For once the world is in a position to appreciate the message of Ecclesiastes—"All is vanity and a striving after wind" (1:14)—or of 1 Peter 1:24:

*All people are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
the grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of the Lord endures forever.*

For once the whole world is being reminded of the foolishness of trusting inordinately in money, material possessions, medicine, or human expertise. For once the needs of the weak, the elderly, the medically challenged are taking precedence over those of the strong. For once the world has a little dose of the fear of God thrown into it, as it hunkers down in the trenches against this insidious enemy. And for once the world, not just the Church, is being brought to its knees for Lent. In view of all this, let us hope that the world will also hear and respond to Lent's glorious invitation to "repent and believe the good news."

For all that COVID-19 has most of us in lockdown, we still tend to default to business, human control and the belief that "we can handle this". But then you listen to the testimony of the utterly exhausted medical practitioners in Italy and Spain and their stories of utter powerlessness in the face of overwhelming numbers of suffering and dying people, and we are warned not to glibly trust in our customary self-reliance.

Lent brings us to the Cross which is the place where our many words are reduced to silence and we can only sink to our knees in both agony and worship. Lent calls us to step away from our endless human opinion and bustle, into surrendered stillness. Mike Mason concludes,

Lent is the one special time of the year that has no appropriate greeting attached to it. We do not go around jovially shouting, "Happy Lent!" or "Merry Good Friday!" No, only one greeting is appropriate for this occasion: silence. Nor do we 'celebrate' Lent but rather 'observe' it. Or allow it to observe us.

When Job in his extreme affliction and broken-heartedness, sat in the refuse pit of broken pottery, using the bits to scratch his ulcerated skin, his comforters came and for seven days and nights sat beside him in silence. Should there not be a deep silence in the world at this time?

Along with silence, N. T. Wright recalls us to the note of lament which is frequently struck in the psalms.

At this point the Psalms, the Bible's own hymnbook, come back into their own, just when some churches seem to have given them up. "Be gracious to me, Lord," prays the sixth Psalm, "for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror." "Why do you stand

far off, O Lord?” asks the 10th Psalm plaintively. “Why do you hide yourself in time of trouble?” And so it goes on: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever?” (Psalm 13). And, all the more terrifying because Jesus himself quoted it in his agony on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22).

The point of lament, woven thus into the fabric of the biblical tradition, is not just that it’s an outlet for our frustration, sorrow, loneliness and sheer inability to understand what is happening or why. The mystery of the biblical story is that God also laments. Some Christians like to think of God as above all that, knowing everything, in charge of everything, calm and unaffected by the troubles in his world. That’s not the picture we get in the Bible.

God was grieved to his heart, Genesis declares, over the violent wickedness of his human creatures. He was devastated when his own bride, the people of Israel, turned away from him. And when God came back to his people in person—the story of Jesus is meaningless unless that’s what it’s about—he wept at the tomb of his friend. St. Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit “groaning” within us, as we ourselves groan within the pain of the whole creation. The ancient doctrine of the Trinity teaches us to recognize the One God in the tears of Jesus and the anguish of the Spirit.

Lent offers us this profound reminder that God came to earth to share in our sufferings and, in all seasons of human hardship, he is alongside us in our anguish and, as we surrender afresh to him in silence and lament, he carries out his hidden work of transformation in ways that are very different from our self-directed notions. Thus Lent ultimately leads us to resurrection. N. T. Wright concludes,

As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell. And out of that there can emerge new possibilities, new acts of kindness, new scientific understanding, new hope.