

LENT, FAMILY STYLE

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Sitting here, in the living room of our small but comfortable home in suburban Lower Hutt, New Zealand, hearing the slow, soothing tick of the clock, feeling the softness of my bathrobe and the tickle of the cat's tail as he wanders out to the kitchen for food, I feel a long way away from the austerities and self-denial of a monastic Lenten observance. I am a wife, a mother of a preschool daughter, a full-time health and safety consultant/trainer, a part-time university student – oh, and a Sister in the Community of Solitude, wearing a traditional Benedictine habit (where appropriate) and keeping a regular pattern of monastic prayer and praise.

But what is a “monastic” Lent, anyway? Lent has always been the time where the Church opened herself more fully to the passion of Jesus; where prayer, penance and almsgiving were the three keys that opened the door to Easter's joys. Prayer, penance, and almsgiving? Sounds rather nasty!

But Lent was never intended to be nasty, or guilt-ridden, or wallowing in obscene self-flagellation. It is a wondrous (albeit solemn) season, a time where God issues each of us with a purple-edged invitation to Presence. “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest,” it reads. “Take my yoke upon you, for my yoke is easy and my burden light.” That sounds like a huge gift to a busy wife/mother/Sister, with far too many demands upon her time and not enough hours in the day (or sometimes, inclination to use those hours to their full potential!).

Prayer, in its essence, is communicating with God, and it is a graced and beautiful thing. God does not count the number of prayers I pray. God does not watch the clock to see how many minutes I spend praying (or not praying!). God does not get angry if I happen to miss an Office (part of my monastic observance is praying Morning and Evening Prayer, often known as the Divine Office). God does not say to me, “Where have you been! You naughty girl, you've been running away again!” God does say, “Please come. I want to be with you. I want to speak with you, to learn your heart, to hold you in my love.” God wants me to be aware of the beauty and wonder of the world he made for me to walk on. When I see the colours shifting in the waters of Wellington Harbour, or watch and marvel at the power and majesty of one of our southerly storms reaching its wind hands out to shake the trees and crash the mighty waves against the rocks, I see something of the awesomeness of the God who called the world out of nothing, and I pray. I am aware of God, and present to God's Presence shining through the ordinary and the everyday.

And it doesn't have to be something special that makes me aware of God. It can be as simple as reading my little girl a story, seeing her smile and snuggle into my shoulder; my cat leaning against me and purring me to sleep; the satisfaction at seeing the bathroom actually clean (for about five minutes) and the house tidy (for about one minute – if I'm lucky!). It can be the exhausted, pleased feeling of a job well done as we wash up the paintbrushes after adding another coat of paint outside on our little house; it can even be the tired, emotional aftermath of a family brangle when we all learn again the lessons of forgiveness and “starting over”.

Penance is also a much more simple thing than we've all made it out to be. We tend to call it “self-denial” now and get all self-righteous about “how much we've given up for Lent.” God isn't

interested in how we manage to withstand the smell of that gorgeous bar of chocolate waiting, enticing, beckoning us to have just one tiny little taste.... God isn't interested in us virtuously turning down that glass of wine saying, "I gave it up for Lent." God is interested in what we do with that "space" we've created. Self-denial is about making a bit more space for God's grace to sneak in, "widening the cracks", as it were, letting ourselves be more open to God. Giving up chocolate is no good to anyone if it doesn't make us more aware of God's love for us. My husband gave up coffee for Lent one year, and he said that it was both the hardest thing and the stupidest thing he's ever done. Hardest, because coffee is his morning juice (very important when you're the stay-at-home dad to a preschooler!), and stupidest because he spent most of the first part of Lent with a raging headache and as cross as a winter-roused grizzly – and all it did for him was create resentment, not space for God.

Lent for me is trying to be more positive and intentional about being with God: praying the rosary a bit more (and carrying it in my pocket, so every time I touch it I am reminded of God's love); praying the Stations of the Cross – not being "religious" about it, but using it as a time to meditate on God's wonder and loveliness, and being open to the darkness and the silence that this often means for me. It has meant some time in the lovely church next to my work, standing in front of the rather dramatic pieta and looking into Mary's eyes, wondering what it was like for her as a mother, holding the body of her tortured son.

This meditation about Mary and her broken child has also meant I'm thinking more of others. How do my actions impact on them? I am happy that one of my favourite chocolate manufacturers has now decided to move to fair-trade cocoa for all its chocolate. My daughter has started a "Lent jar": every time we find a stray coin in the house, we're putting it in the jar and we'll give it to our Diocesan appeal "Kash for Kagera" (our partner Diocese in Tanzania).

Almsgiving doesn't have to be complicated either. Sometimes the best "alms" is time: time with someone who needs to talk; doing a bit of extra housework to help out my manically busy husband; donating my skills to the church Talent Auction. Sometimes almsgiving can be a "not-doing": biting my tongue when I want to say something sharp or unpleasant to someone; holding back to give someone else a chance to exercise their talent or skill; keeping a short rein on my temper (still very hot, even after struggling to control it for over thirty years...).

Lent is an invitation to openness to God, and openness to our own innerness: letting what is truly true in us well up and being truly open to the Trueness that is God. Seeing God in the everyday. Hearing God in the three-thousandth "Why, mummy?" question of the hour. Feeling God in the first chill of the autumn nights. Touching God in the crumpled leaf that crunches underfoot. Knowing God in the silence – and in the noise and confusion. Being me, and letting God be God with me.

Sounds pretty good to me, really.