

## Tuesday Lent Week Three



There is a false view of Lent - and spiritual asceticism (exercise) generally - that associates it with being or pretending to be solemn to the point of miserable. Jesus addresses this by saying, when you practice a discipline of self-restraint, don't publicise it and look hard done by or pious. Go out of your way to be relaxed and cheerful.

There is a guilt dynamic embedded in our psyche. And another upsetting factor in the ego is the magical feeling that every happy moment uses up limited credit, like on a phone plan, and this has to be topped up by doing something hard or difficult. You pay for happiness. Happiness is a product not our natural state. We don't have the right to be happy while the world is disrupted by a global virus, or there are a million refugees displaced in Syria or a friend is suffering.

What is happiness? For religious people, this slides into the idea of a God who only wants you to be happy on his terms, when you are worshipping him in a way he approves. And this God, a complex form of the idea of karma – you get what you deserve – then becomes a petty god who rewards and punishes. Religious training and cultural ideas of God often reinforce these ideas, but they are first formed in childhood as we observe how adults treat us. Good boy, here's a present. Bad boy, go to bed.

Meditation has a surprising power to break up every self-reinforcing complex of ideas and compulsive loop-thinking. This works directly on all our thoughts and images about God – which are not just intellectual items but strongly emotional. If you believe that God will punish you for your faults you are emotionally affected in everything you do and in all your relationships. Then, as ideas of God change, so do our fundamental views of reality and our relations with other people.

Religious people are often made uncomfortable in the first stage of this process. They feel that God is disappearing, that meditation isn't really prayer or that they may end up as an atheist. A man once told me he meditated faithfully but was not convinced it was really a form of prayer of which the Church or God approved. So, he would begin each meditation with a prayer: 'Dear God I am going to meditate now. But believe me, I am not really a Buddhist.'

As old ideas of God fade, nothing solid immediately comes to take their place. Time and faith however help us to realise that the nothing is poverty of spirit, that emptiness is the space of fullness and that the loss is the first part of a cycle that leads to a surprising fresh kind of discovery. We find what we have lost but it is changed because it was lost. In the distance it took from us while it was lost it or we changed. Sometimes we do have to lose our beliefs about God, even to stop believing and wait. Until we believe again in a new way. Faith is deepened in the tunnels of time. And time is transcended by faith.

Laurence Freeman OSB

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laurence". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small flourish at the end. Below the signature is a horizontal line.

