

RONALD ROLHEISER - ENTERING LENT

Sometimes the etymology of a word can be helpful. Linguistically, lent is derived from an old English word meaning springtime. In Latin, *lente* means slowly. Etymologically, then, lent points to the coming of spring and it invites us to slow down our lives so as to be able to take stock of ourselves. That does capture some of the traditional meaning, though the popular mindset. It understands lent mostly as a season within which we are asked to fast from certain normal, healthy pleasures so as to better ready ourselves for the feast of Easter. One of the images for this is the biblical idea of the Desert. Jesus, we are told, in order to prepare for his public ministry, went into the desert for forty days and forty nights during which time he fasted and, as the Gospel of Mark tells us, was put to the test by Satan, was with the wild animals, and was looked after by the angels.

Lent has always been understood as a time of us to imitate this, to metaphorically spend forty days in the desert like Jesus, unprotected by normal nourishment so as to have to face "Satan" and the "wild animals" and see whether the "angels" will indeed come and look after us when we reach that point where we can no longer look after ourselves. For us, "Satan" and "wild animals" refer particularly to the chaos inside of us that normally we either deny or simply refuse to face – our paranoia, our anger, our jealousies, our distance from others, our fantasies, our grandiosity, our addictions, our unresolved hurts, our sexual complexity, our incapacity to really pray, our faith doubts, and our moral secrets. The normal food that we eat, distracted ordinary life, works to shield us from the deeper chaos that lurks beneath the surface of our lives.

Lent invites us to stop eating whatever protects us from having to face the desert that is inside of us. It invites us to feel our smallness, to feel our vulnerability, to feel our fears, and to open ourselves up the chaos of the desert so that we can finally give the angels a chance to feed us. That's the Christian ideal of lent, to face one's chaos. To supplement this, I would like to offer three rich mythical images, each of which helps explain one aspect of lent and fasting: In every culture, there are ancient stories, myths, which teach that all of us, at times, have to sit in the ashes. We all know, for example, the story of Cinderella. The name itself literally means, the little girl (*puella*) who sits in the ashes (*cinders*). The moral of the story is clear: Before you get to be beautiful, before you get to marry the prince or princess, before you get to go to the great feast, you must first spend some lonely time in the ashes, humbled, smudged, tending to duty and the unglamorous, waiting. Lent is that season, a time to sit in the ashes. It is not incidental that we begin lent by marking our foreheads with ashes.

The second mythical image is that of sitting under Saturn, of being a child of Saturn. The ancients believed that Saturn was the star of sadness, of heaviness, of melancholy. Accordingly they weren't always taken aback when someone fell under its spell, namely, when someone felt sad or depressed. Indeed they believed that everyone had to spend certain seasons of his or her life being a child of Saturn, that is, sitting in heaviness, sitting in sadness, waiting patiently while some important inner thing worked itself out inside the soul. Sometimes elders or saints would put themselves voluntarily under Saturn, namely, like Jesus going into the desert, they would sit in a self-induced heaviness, in the hope that this melancholy would be means to reach some new depth of soul. That too is the function of lent.

Finally there is the rich image, found in some ancient mythologies, of letting our tears reconnect us with the flow of the water of life, of letting our tears reconnect us to the origins of life. Tears, as we know, are salt-water. That is not without deep significance. The oceans too are salt water and, as we know too, all life takes its origins there. Hence, we get the mystic and poetic idea that tears reconnect us to the origins of life, that tears regenerate us, that tears cleanse us in a life-giving way, and that tears deepen the soul by letting it literally taste the origins of life. Given the truth of that, and we have all experienced its truth, tears too are a desert to be entered into as a Lenten practice, a vehicle to reach new depths of soul.

The need for lent is experienced everywhere: Without sublimation we can never attain what is sublime. To truly enter a feast there must first be a fast. To come properly to Easter there must first be a time of desert, ashes, heaviness, and tears.