

Death & Resurrection



40 Reflections on **Lent**

By Fr. Ken Sedlak, C.Ss.R.

The Lenten Season



Lent is the time of year when we are led into the desert to face our temptations, those attitudes, values and motivations that without our knowing separate us from God. It does no good to feel guilty or negative about them. This is God's mercy at work trying to alert us to the frustration that they create so that we can awaken to our need for God. God is always here loving us at every moment. We are always God's "Beloved." God's relationship to us never changes. It is as eternal as God is. But we need to learn to rely on God instead of the poverty of our own resources.

The main task of religion, the intense ambition of Lent, is to lead us to the realization of our essence. Religion speaks of this in many different images; returning "to the bosom of the Father," "to the Father's house," "to the kingdom of God," "to the heavenly city of Jerusalem," "being saved or redeemed." Actually there is no place we have to go. But wandering around lets us feel useful until we're ready to let God transform our awareness.

Conversion, the movement of love toward the Lord, is a process of disenchantment with the ego and its desire for survival and security, affection and esteem, power and control. The only way we can ever be freed is to become aware of the pain (frustration) these desires cause. Only when we wake up to this painful reality will we begin to find the need for something more satisfying. As St. Augustine said, "My heart is restless until it rests in you Lord."

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The living experience of God's loving energy filling us with aliveness, with a savoring of this moment is our best chance to move beyond survival and security, affection and esteem, power and control. It's not that any one of these is evil in itself. It's just that they have become substitutes for the love of God which we come to know by loving. Using anyone of these in a loving way can move us beyond them. Using our power, whatever it is, to help others will help us begin to know God's loving presence working through us. Using our possessions to comfort others will help us know God's loving generosity alive within us. Using our prestige, our dignity and sense of worth by treating others with respect will help us know that our lives are more than we can create for ourselves, our lives are given out of love. Looking out for others will free us from being tied to our own survival. It will make room for God as the Source of our living.

The Desert



1

The desert, the silent place of aloneness, is where we learn to live in the vastness of God. In the desert we learn that it is not about us because we are about Trinity. Love comes from beyond us and love must continue to go beyond us. But it is up to us to set our priorities. What or who will we trust to be the source of our living?

2

Jesus learns who he really is just like we do. He learns from others who act as mirrors to reflect back who they see in him. He also learns from the way he handles life experiences.

In our lives we get a sense of our self when we don't get what we want.

Our immediate reaction says more about our motivations than our intentions do. Intentions are only self-expectations until we actually learn to live from them.

3

One of the Hebrew Testament's traditions about Satan is the one who tempts us in order to expose our true motivations (see Job 1:10). In this gospel Satan's temptations reveal Jesus' awareness of the reality and necessity of God as the foundation of his actions. Jesus' whole life will be an attempt to awaken us to this awareness of God as the source and center of our lives.

4

Survival and security, affection and esteem, power and control are necessary for our well being. But when we feel separated from God, from the Source of our living, they become distorted, self centered, and destructive. We are made for so much more.

5

After forty days of fasting, the Tempter taunts him with the illusion of independence: “If you are the Beloved command these stones to become loaves of bread.” (Matthew 4:1-10) He taunts Jesus, ‘Prove that you are you own man.’ Jesus remains focused on the inner place where he experiences himself as Beloved and replies: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.”

6

The Tempter is persistent and throws God's own words at him: If you really are Beloved, "Throw yourself down [from the parapet] for it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you and with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus will not allow himself to be separated from our Father: "You shall put the Lord, your God, to the test." Love is freely given or it would not be love. Testing love feeds our fears, creates separation and binds love within the limitations of our mind.

7

The final temptation is one of desperation for the Tempter: "All these [kingdoms of the world] I will give you if you bow down and worship me." Jesus knows intimately that without God, possessing the whole world means nothing. Power is an illusion and cannot substitute for the intimacy of our Father. When God is not the center of our lives we feel separated from the Source of our vitality and existence and react with defensive fear. And Jesus, who acts out of the freedom love creates, replies "Get away you Satan! It is written: 'The Lord your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.'" (Deut. 6:13)

8

The Gospel for the First Sunday in Lent tells us that the Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert so that he could face the illusion of separateness from God that we all live with. Satan plays on this by getting us to turn to other things besides God for our source and meaning. When we turn towards these we begin to be driven by fear, anxiety and anger. Jesus, of course resisted. In the Gospel story of the Transfiguration we see the result: “While he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothes became dazzling white.”

Fasting



9

All fasting is relaxing, letting go and releasing God's love to flow freely throughout your person.

10

An Exercise to accompany your fasting:

Here is a way of fasting that will feed our spirit so that we can see more clearly. Take a moment to relax. Take a few deep breaths and remind yourself the Jesus is with you, here and now, loving you and helping you see more clearly, just like he helped the disciples.

Take a moment to complete this sentence as many times as possible:

Who am I? _____

Next work with this list of self-descriptions. Imagine Jesus saying to you:

“I tell you, do not be anxious about your life,
Whether you are _____

(Fill in the blank with one of the descriptions you have on your list and then continue to read).

Your life—your reality—is more than that, and God’s love for you does not depend on such qualities. Be secure in God’s love, something you can rely on and not be anxious about.

11

Meeting God in the here and now is what the disciplines of Lent are about. Becoming aware of our woundedness helps us be aware of our need for God. Fasting clears our awareness. It’s a form of detoxification. Almsgiving is an act of compassion in which we recognize our need for one another. And prayer is anything we do to open our lives to God’s presence. It’s a choice to live in relationship to God.

12

Prayer can dissolve our illusions. It dissolves them very gently, as we let go of layers and layers of judgments and surrender to the gift of unconditional love.

13

Prayer also takes us into the layers of hurt and anger, bitterness and resentment that have built up through the many disappointments and tragedies of our lives. These heal as we are filled with the grace of accepting their reality and loving them for what they are. This means letting go of the ways we want our life to be and believe it should be.

14

As we learn to surrender our ego,
to let God's unconditional love seep
through our soul and become its
healing: this is called "redemption."

The Transfiguration



15

The Transfiguration of Jesus is a moment of seeing clearly. We read about the Transfiguration in Lent because it is meant to challenge our blindness as well.

16

We must keep the dazzling image of Jesus before us. It is Jesus' legacy to us, the beacon of our possibility. It entices us beyond the numbness of what seems to be our normal lives and awakens us to the gift and responsibility of divine partnership in bringing healing, peace, and justice into this world. For we too are meant to see ourselves mirrored in the Transfigured Jesus.

17

The moment of Transfiguration is a revelation of what Jesus is all about. It is Jesus as he was experienced after his death and resurrection.

18

Death leaves us powerless, and we who are left behind are powerless to do anything about it but grieve. Death leaves us without possessions; “You can’t take it with you.” And death leaves whatever praise we have received as mere words. But the experience of Jesus’ followers in dealing with Jesus’ death left them with a new reality: they found that Jesus was still with them. They called this “Resurrection.” Jesus, through the love of our Father, had dealt with the illusions (temptations) of power, possessions and prestige. This is the real meaning of fasting and mortification. We pervert them when we let our ego turn them into ways of proving our will power or love for Jesus. Jesus doesn’t need us to prove ourselves, Jesus needs us to see clearly.

19

We too overflow with God. We too burst from the heart of God, an outpouring of God’s love. We too exist because of the intimate closeness of God. We too radiate divine, dazzling being. This doesn’t mean that we are gods, it means we are God’s, we emerge from God and exist as God’s expression in time and space. God freely chooses us.

20

As we continue the weeks of Lent we must keep the dazzling image of Jesus before us. It is Jesus' legacy to us, and the beacon of our possibility.

It entices us beyond the numbness of what seems to be our normal lives and awakens us to the gift and responsibility of divine partnership in bringing healing into this world.

Transforming Our Pain



21

On Ash Wednesday we were anointed with ashes, a reminder that nothing we do or nothing we have will endure.

“You are dust and to dust you will return.” This stark statement is the kindest of truths, for it stops us from wasting our lives.

22

Jesus is our Redeemer because he is the possibility of who we can become.

23

Jesus is our Redeemer because he took the pain and suffering of our human woundedness, and began our healing. We call this “dying for our sins.” It continues in our lives as God heals our pain, and binds our wounds with the balm of God’s loving essence.

24

Our minds get stuck in the past or the future and God is here right now. This is what Jesus wants us to “see.” He is trying to get us to be present, right here, right now, without judgments.

25

We can know God only through relationship, not through our thoughts. We’ll never define God into our lives. But we can meet God—right here, right now.

26

The fullness of life in Christ is not pain and suffering avoided or denied. It is pain and suffering transformed, as the cross itself reveals.

27

Jesus on the cross identifies with the human problem, the darkness of our wounded lives. He refuses to stand outside of the human dilemma. On the cross evil is not overcome by attack or avoidance, but by union with our Father.

28

The spiritual path does not bring about improvement or perfection. It brings about a maturity, a humanity, and a wisdom in loving and accepting love.

29

The aim of connection to God is to become more human, not to arrive at some transcendent state in which the difficulties of being human are not present.

30

There is no spiritual loyalty tests in Jesus' ministry. Not a single one of his healings or exorcisms depends on worthiness. Jesus responds with God's compassion whenever he meets someone in need. Our need is God's only criteria for his compassion.

31

When we feel fear we must learn to "suffer" our actual fear, taste the nature of our anxiety, get a sense of its texture and style, its falsity and disguises. We have to admit that we don't want to lose something, and admit exactly what that something is, be it our reputation, our comfort, our place among our friends, or our control. When we enter the reality of our fear and our weakness, we will find healing. We will find the compassion and love of our Father who, like his Son, always responds to our need.

The Passion



32

On the cross of Christ we see God's heart made vulnerable to us. We see God's compassion and determination to meet us where we are, love us for who we are and to hold us internally close.

33

Every parent, every lover, every close friend knows the vulnerability of loss and grief that comes with loving. To love is to be vulnerable. To love unconditionally, like God loves, is to be unconditionally vulnerable. And yet it is the vulnerability that creates the most intimate bonding in our relationships. A bonding that fuses us spiritually on a level so deep that we are most aware of the fusion when we've lost the physical dimension of our love.

34

The essence of the wound that inflicts all of us is the illusion and belief that we are separate from God. This illusion makes us look to ourselves as the center of our lives, actions, security and possibilities. The fact is, God is the center; God loving us unconditionally and holding us in existence.

35

On the cross Jesus' human vulnerability to evil unites with ours to expose the incredible intimacy of God as the source and center of our existence. On the cross Jesus is thrust into the woundedness and the pain that we cannot avoid.

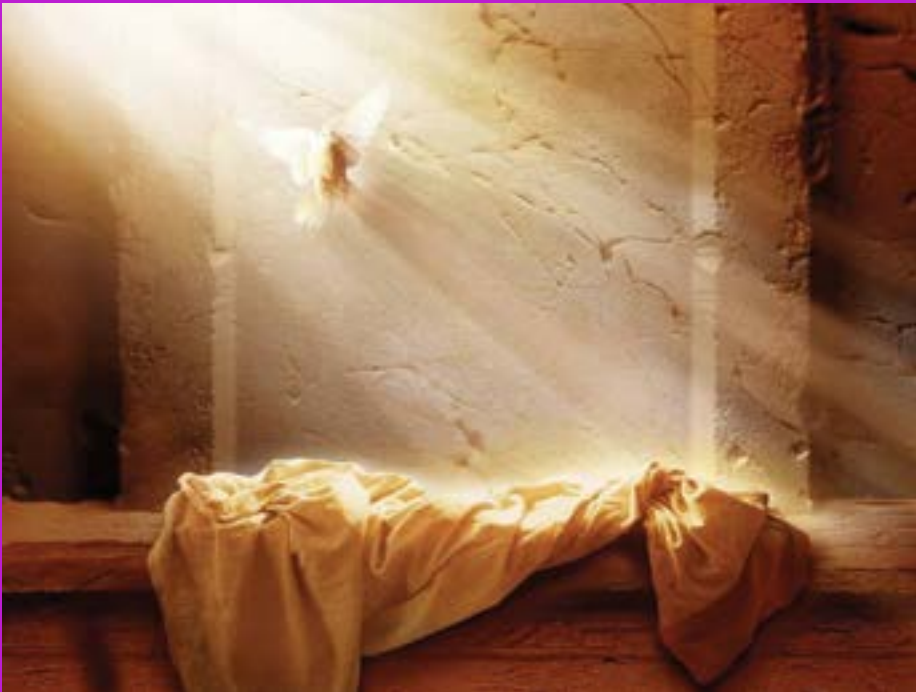
36

Every year at this time I recall the wisdom of St. Alphonsus Liguori the founder of the Redemptorists. He said: "When you look upon the cross of Christ do not dwell on the pain and suffering, but on the love with which Christ died for us."

37

The final week of Lent, the most holy week of our church year, invites us to gaze upon the cross so that our hearts will be softened, made vulnerable to God's softness, compassion and vulnerability to us. This final parable of death and new life is meant to expose all that needs to be healed within us, to create compassionate bonding with all that needs to be healed within our sisters and brothers, and in this bonding to know our God as the intimate source of all that is love and creates love.

The Resurrection



38

What does it mean for us to be part of the resurrected universe that Jesus has unleashed through his life, death and resurrection? Evolution is God lovingly giving, bringing all of creation into the Oneness of divine intimacy. Through resurrected eyes, eyes that are no longer spiritually blind, we will learn to see all of creation being fully integrated by and into the Divine expression of self-giving love.

39

The events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection express the fundamental trajectory of the whole cosmos. Jesus' transformation into the Christ happens through the suffering and death that anticipates his new life. Our new seeing must be willing to accept this pattern as integral to the relationship between God and Creation. God is the essence of all creation. Death is not merely an irrational and unfortunate product of creation. Rather, death is integral to who God is as self-giving love. And Jesus' life is the concrete expression of that love through totally surrendering himself to the evolution that is necessary to healing our woundedness. This is the inner meaning of salvation.

40

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus encapsulates cosmic evolution as an essential part of divine/human nature. His suffering and death is not only a historical event to convince us that we are both wounded and loved, but a cosmic event which gives meaning, purpose, and direction to evolution. Jesus explained, "If I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (Jn. 16:7).

Jesus' departing gift is the Spirit.



Lent is the time of year when we most deeply explore the mystery of our Christian faith. Through the forty brief reflections of Death and Resurrection, Fr. Ken Sedlak, C.Ss.R, explores with us the critical process of disenchantment with the ego and its desires that we must undertake. Fr. Sedlak tells us that this is the truest path to Christian freedom. Through this process Lent becomes a time of conversion in which, by the power of love, we move closer to the Lord.



Fr. Sedlak wrote *Death and Resurrection* based on his own spiritual journey with Pathways, a prayer and spiritual support group at St. Michael's Church in Chicago.

