

# Ipswich Unitarians

## TEMPLES IN THE WILDERNESS

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It is, perhaps, a sign of the times that you are more likely to hear about Ramadan these days than you are about Lent. For Muslims, Ramadan is an important and sacred time. Even Muslims who are not very observant will make the effort in Ramadan, fasting from sunrise to sunset on every day of this lunar month (which begins this year on 11<sup>th</sup> August). Keeping this fast is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. In Muslim countries and Muslim communities no one could fail to know or to notice that something special was going on during Ramadan.

This is not the case with Lent in our society. It may be observed in some way by some who identify as Christian, but even then it is rarely regarded with anything like the same reverence as Ramadan is among Muslims. And in the wider society, now disconnected from its Christian roots, Lent just doesn't register in the popular consciousness.

In our own tradition, that of Rational Dissenting Reformed Protestantism, the traditional fasts feasts of medieval Christianity came to be regarded with suspicion and even hostility. They were seen either as mere external observances, as 'works' that could contribute nothing to the salvation that comes through faith alone, or as superstitious customs that had no place in a reasoned and measured faith with no room for fanatical ascetic practices like fasting! What mattered was the spiritual discipline of the mind and the soul, not the physical deprivation of the body – which can be very unhealthy in all sorts of ways!

More recently, though, there has been a renewed awareness of the wholeness of the human person, the realisation that the physical aspect of ourselves is not so easily distinguished from the mental and the spiritual. And this raises the issue of fasting once again. Not that the extremes of ascetic practice should be revived, of course, but rather that our personal spiritual practice should recognise that it matters what we do with our bodies, what we put into them, and how well we look after them. The sacredness of the body is something that Saint Paul declared long ago: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is God's gift to you?" (I Corinthians 6: 19).

And if the body is a temple then we should treat it as such, neither neglecting it so that it goes to wrack and ruin, nor cluttering it up with all sorts of inappropriate junk that detracts from its true nature as a holy place. It should be cared for and well-maintained, and it should leave room for the Holy Spirit it was built to accommodate! And Lent is not a bad time for us to think about that.

Observing Lent, in the sense of giving up some personal luxury or favourite food, is only beneficial if we use the sense of deprivation as a focus for reflection on more important matters – like, how well are we living up to the standards and ideals that we claim to hold dear? Giving up chocolate, for example, is only effective from a spiritual point of view if it helps us to give up the far more important manifestations of self-indulgence – like rudeness, unkindness and spite – that deny love and bring needless pain and hurt to others, be they in our family, our church or our local community, be they known to us or be they strangers on the road - metaphorically or literally!

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And, of course, giving up those manifestations of ingratitude and selfishness is not dependent on giving up chocolate, and nor is it something only for Lent! It's just that, being what we are, it helps to be reminded in Lent of what should be true all the time.

If Lent can be seen as an opportunity to cleanse the body of the toxic products of gluttony and greed, how much more should it be a spur to cleansing our whole being of the spiritual toxins that breed hatred and malice and spill out to poison our relationships with those who we should love and respect. As Jesus said,

*"...nothing that goes into a person from outside can defile him...It is what comes out of a person that defiles him. From inside the human heart come evil thoughts, acts of fornication, theft, murder, adultery, greed, and malice; fraud, indecency, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly: all these things come from within, and they are what defile a person."* (Mark 7: 18, 20-23)

And it is giving up our unloving words, deeds and, even, thoughts that really matters, even if 'giving up something for Lent' is the 'outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace' that achieving this objective would represent. And, of course, to do this is no easy matter, which is where grace comes in. This is not just about the effort of our own will – which is rarely equal to the task! – it is about being open to something greater which we may call the Spirit of God, the Spirit that *is* God, at work within the frail temples that we are.

The reason why Ramadan is so important to Muslims is that, traditionally, it was during this month, on one of the last ten nights – the 'Night of Power' – in the year 610, that the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel. Muhammad had been 'on retreat' in the wilderness outside Mecca. There he received his revelation in a mountain cave. It was this experience that marked the beginning of his mission.

Lent, too, recalls a crucial wilderness experience – that of Jesus, following his baptism. And it was this experience that, according to Christian tradition, marked the beginning of his mission and his ministry. From the wilderness, Luke tells us,

*'...Jesus armed with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee...He taught in their synagogues and everyone sang his praises.'* (Luke 4: 14, 15)

That, of course, was not to last, as we will recall when Lent ends with the commemoration of his suffering and death. Lent's forty days and nights are modelled on what happened to Jesus in the wilderness, driven there by the Spirit. It was his fast in the Judean wilderness that revealed to him who he was, what God wanted him to do, and how he must prepare for the challenge ahead.

The gospel accounts say that, in the wilderness, Jesus was "tempted by Satan", and two of them go into more detail. I think we can safely understand the temptations to represent the inner turmoil – the holy struggle – that Jesus underwent at this crucial time. The three temptations represent things that face us all to a greater or lesser extent, but in a person of great charisma, such as Jesus undoubtedly was, they are amplified accordingly. Nevertheless, they contain lessons for us all.

Following the order in Luke's gospel (in Matthew it is slightly different), the first temptation is about material things and worldly wealth as symbolised by bread. Jesus is offered the power to turn stones into loaves, but he refuses it with the words, "Man is not to live on bread alone." (Luke 4: 4)

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Secondly, Jesus is offered global dominion, “and the glory that goes with it”, if only he will worship Satan – the spirit of worldly power, the impulse to tyranny at every level. But Jesus refuses it with the words, “You shall do homage to the Lord your God and worship him alone.” (Luke 4: 8) And this is not just about the Herods, Hitlers and Saddam Hussein’s of this world. It is about every bully, every petty tyrant who makes miserable the lives of others.

The third temptation is the most insidious for anyone who feels themselves called by God or by Destiny to be a leader – and there have been plenty of those! Told by the devil that his exalted spiritual status guarantees protection against even the laws of gravity, Jesus rejects the temptation with the words, “You are not to put the Lord your God to the test.” (Luke 4: 12)

So Jesus rejects the spiritual pride and delusion that has overcome all too many supposed ‘messiahs’, ‘gurus’, and the like. He rejects any status other than that of a human being, called to serve but offered no special favours for doing so. And again, it is not just the deluded religious tyrants of history that we are talking about here. All of us can come to believe that, spiritually, we are a cut above everyone else. In football parlance, we can all fool ourselves into thinking that we are ‘too good to go down’!

In the wilderness, as we recall in Lent, Jesus faced, struggled with, and overcame *human* temptations such as *all* human beings face in some way and at some point. And because Jesus was as human as we are, we can face, struggle with, and overcome them too – not through arrogant belief in our own strength and power, but through the same faith that he had, faith in the Divine Spirit whose temples we are.

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