
Our Lenten Hearts

An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Lent 5 – Year C

As we come to end of Lent, I feel the need to take less time to say what needs to be said; to concentrate and say it more concisely. For these several weeks we have been focusing so much on self-examination, by acknowledging how captive we are to things that carry us away from Christ: our particular addictions, compulsions, proclivities; our inclinations, affinities, preferences; and also our privileges, and pet peeves. Yeah, all of that!

Regarding all of that, our scripture readings continually exhort us to repent and turn our lives around. The overwhelming effect is strenuous, even exhausting. It's like an athletic regimen. Is there a way to condense the experience, to make it most concentrated or impactful, rather than all consuming?

This reminds me of a conversation I was having with three other preachers. We were discussing our different approaches to preparing for a Sunday morning message. Our first colleague talked about starting sermon preparation early in the week: first research the scriptures and devise, by the end of the week, how to best apply the readings to the congregation.

Our second colleague said that she previews the scriptures about the middle of the week and then by the end of the week settles on a topic, and dedicates most of Saturday for figuring out how to apply the topic to the congregation. Finally, the third preacher among us said: "I arrange to have the congregation sing a really long hymn just before it's time to preach. That's right: arrange for a really long hymn to allow enough time for sermon preparation after hearing the scriptures!"

Well, let me propose one song that I would choose as the most efficient way to condense these last four weeks for this concluding 5th week of Lent. It's the anthem that our choir at the Cathedral of St. Philip has sung over the years. In fact, the anthem is really a poem; the George Herbert poem called "The Altar." And, to go along with our readings for this 5th Sunday of Lent, here is the key verse of the poem:

A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.

"A heart alone," the verse declares, "is such a stone." In Lent, we discover how hard-hearted we are when we are most self-centered; when we are most fortified against letting love and care hold sway over us. "Such a stone" we can become, as we discover during Lent, that it can take a higher power to cut through and allow our hearts to encompass more than ourselves alone—encompass more than our own kind of people, more than our own kind of preferences, or more than our own kind of privileges.

One of my own Lenten experiences like this occurred a couple of Sundays ago as Lent began. I was driving home after making a pastoral call after church. While stopped at an exit off an interstate highway, I spied a young woman positioned so she could solicit donations from passers-by like me. And I passed her by. Like the priest who spies the wounded Samaritan lying in the ditch and passes by on the other side of the road. At the time, I rationalized that I had just made a

pastoral visit to one of our parishioners, that this young woman had not turned her gaze directly at me, that I was in a hurry, that I had just given at the last corner, and that I can't give to every needy person on the street. Yet I have been haunted ever since by a vivid image of her pile of clothing and bags blowing in the wind, while she tried to get herself together to receive charity from others. And since then I also hear that old expression, 'the milk of human kindness,' revolving around and around in my head.

Thus, I have been both chastened and converted by the truth of the George Herbert verse:

A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.

[REPEAT]

However—and thanks be to God!—that verse also invokes a power that is able to “cut” our hardened, calloused hearts of stone. Moreover, precisely that power the apostle Paul extols in his letter to the Philippians; the reading that the church assigns for us today. There we find his most profound and precise text for how to prepare for Easter resurrection.

Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ . . .
For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own . . . but one that comes through faith in Christ.

According to Paul in this passage, it really doesn't matter how right I am in this or that interaction. There's something more at stake than my particular righteousness about this or about that: something more life-giving and flourishing; more transforming and triumphant. And then he concludes:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:8-11).

Now those are among the most concentrated, most condensed Lenten verses in Holy Scripture: to 'know Christ and the power of his resurrection' by 'sharing in his sufferings and becoming like him in his death.'

Likewise, our George Herbert verse expresses our most concentrated, most condensed experience of Lent: that is, our 'share' in Christ's sufferings, and our becoming like him in his death. For in this season we dare to look right at the places where we have betrayed or abandoned or forgotten love—our attraction and attachment to those places, so that our deepest suffering in Lent is a compounded travail or anguish. Like our Lord's agony or passion on the Cross as he experienced all of humanity's violations against love, we too let ourselves see and admit the places where our hearts are fortified, calloused or hardened against loving and being loved; against fully giving love and fully receiving love. In that way we 'share in his sufferings,' and Paul espoused to do, and we 'become like him in his death,' as Paul yearned to die to self and live to God in Christ.

But this Lenten journey is for the say of an Easter destination! While it remains true that

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Thank God, indeed, there is such a holy power that vouchsafes for us renewed life beyond such suffering and death. For as followers of Christ, we agree to sacrifice our hard-hearted selves on God's altar of unconditional love, so that our true selves may rise and be resurrected again and again for a new life of all-inclusive love. Yes! A love divine through Christ has now become our human love as well.

Thanks be to God! And Amen.

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