

SoulSpace

SERIES: AGENDA FOR LENT

Season colour: **PURPLE**

In this series, **Gerard Moloney CSsR** explores the meaning of Lent and how to make the most of this holy season.

THE THREE PRACTICES OF LENT

What struck Nobel most about reading his obituary was how he was presented. It wasn't his wealth or his many achievements – most notably the invention of dynamite – that unsettled him, but the title they'd given him: 'The Merchant of Death'. His most recognised achievement was that he "devised a way for more people to be killed in a war than ever before..."

Nobel was deeply disturbed by this title. It wasn't how he saw himself, and yet it was how history would think of him if things didn't change. And so, he turned to the nobler pursuit of peace. Revising his will, he established the Nobel Peace Prize – and became associated, to this day, with 'Good Works' rather than with The Merchant of Death. The false obituary gave him a second chance.

A TIME FOR CHANGE?

If only we had the chance to read our own obituary while still alive; to see our life summed up and, if necessary, to change. Yet, as Christians, we get this opportunity, every year, during the season of Lent. For 40 days, the church invites us to journey with Jesus to Jerusalem. Lent involves two things we'd rather avoid – suffering and death. In scripture we read how the palms laid before Jesus as he entered Jerusalem on the Sunday turned into a crown of thorns just a few days later.

Reflecting on death should point us back to life. Our vices should be admitted, our sinful behaviours

stopped, our virtues strengthened. Lent is our chance to: "Repent and hear the Good News."

The three great Lenten practices – prayer, fasting, and almsgiving - help us to do just that. They help us to get our life in order. All three draw us closer to God, all three strengthen our virtues, and all three are connected. In his Ash Wednesday homily last year, Pope Francis spoke about Lent as "a privileged time for prayer". He also quoted St Augustine, who described fasting and almsgiving as "the two wings of prayer", because they are signs of humility and charity. Fasting goes well with prayer, because by fasting, we deny our human appetites, and can focus more intensely on our prayer.

Another reason for fasting is to show solidarity with the poor. What we give up through abstinence we give to those less fortunate. Pope Francis says, "Fasting makes sense if it really chips away at our security and, as a consequence, benefits someone else, if it helps us cultivate the style of the Good Samaritan, who bent down to his brother in need and took care of him." That is why every year Trócaire runs a special campaign during Lent to support its work for justice and peace. It is making the connection between fasting and almsgiving. Making the Lenten sacrifice helps us to focus on what's important in our lives and to live simpler lives, also.

The days of Lent give us the opportunity to look at our priorities, to change, to repent, to grow. Alfred Nobel was lucky enough to be given the chance to rewrite his obituary. Lent gives us the chance to write ours. ■



Today's readings

GOD'S WORD TODAY

Exodus 20:1-17

1 Corinthians 1:22-25

John 2:13-25

The episode in today's Gospel reading shows Jesus in an unusual light: he is angry and in a rage.

He refers to the Temple in Jerusalem as "my Father's house". This place was intended to provide privileged access to the divine presence: however, it is being used as an opportunity for making money. The activities described were all in fact legitimate: whether they were appropriate in that sacred setting seems to be the question.

One of the themes running through the Fourth Gospel is that Jesus in his person replaces the important feasts and institutions of Judaism. The Temple, known in Hebrew as the house of the Lord, was the place where God was present in the inner sanctuary known as the Holy of Holies (that is, the Holiest Place). The dialogue between Jesus and the Jewish leaders uses the literary method of misunderstanding, in which the word sanctuary is taken by Jesus' listeners to mean the Temple building, whereas he is speaking of his body.

John is telling us that as a result of Jesus' being lifted up on the cross, he will himself become the place in which people will be able to encounter the living God.

The three great Lenten practices – prayer, fasting, and almsgiving – give us the opportunity to look at what's most important in life, to change, to repent, to grow.

Imagine you stumbled across your own obituary. In 1888, Alfred Nobel had this experience when a French newspaper mistakenly reported him dead; sadly, it was his brother Ludvig who'd passed away.

