

I don't know whether I should be admitting this in church, but I can't think of a better subject for comedy than religion. Whether it is because this taps into people's personal experiences of religious institutions, it shows our religious leaders to be as fallible and human as the rest of us, or it makes fun of something we are not really supposed to laugh at, some of the best comedy I know is based on religion. I can remember anxiously looking over my shoulder as a teenager to see if anybody from our church could see me going to the cinema to watch *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. I have watched parish council meetings on *The Vicar of Dibley*, and wondered why our vestry meetings weren't nearly so entertaining. And the late Dave Allen is my favourite comedian of all time, largely on the strength of his religious sketches.

Then there is *Father Ted*. One of the most popular sitcoms in Irish television history, it follows the misadventures of three Roman Catholic priests, who have been banished by their bishop to a parish on the fictional Craggy Island, as a punishment for some past impropriety. The likeable but scheming Father Ted, the feeble-minded Father Dougal, and the violent, lecherous, and almost permanently sozzled Father Jack, all live on the bleak and miserable island, with their housekeeper, the widowed and eccentric Mrs Doyle.

One of my favourite episodes of *Father Ted* is 'Cigarettes and Alcohol and Rollerblading', in which the three priests are tricked by the priests of a rival parish into giving up their favourite vices for Lent. Father Ted stops smoking. Father Dougal stops rollerblading. And the hopelessly dipsomaniac Father Jack stops drinking. I will not spoil the story by saying what happens next, except to say Lent degenerates into hilarity and chaos.

Today is, of course, the First Sunday in Lent, "a period of 40 days leading up to Easter following the journey of Christ from the wilderness to the cross, and sharing the lessons of Christ's temptation, conflicts and sufferings."¹ Lent originated from the time of fasting and instruction in the Christian faith that was undertaken by new converts as preparation for their baptisms at Easter. It is a time of fasting, prayer, and special devotion.

I have noticed there seems to have been something of a renewed interest in Lent in recent years, including in churches that have never traditionally observed this season. Several years ago, I went to a service at my brother's church on (what we call) Maundy Thursday to celebrate the end of their '21 days of Prayer and Fasting'. It was not 40 days, and they did not call it Lent, but it was certainly based on it.

And I have read it is not uncommon for churches to have a bigger attendance on Ash Wednesday than on any day of the year apart from Christmas. That means more people going to church on Ash Wednesday than on Easter Day.

Whenever popular culture mentions Lent, it seems to focus on the fasting, or 'giving something up' aspect. Indeed, people will often ask each other what they are giving up for Lent. I am guilty of this myself. One year, I asked Maria what she was giving up for Lent. She said she would give up broccoli. But with the rediscovery of Lent, there seems to be a growing realisation there is more to Lent is more than fasting, or giving things up, and that Lent is also a time of prayer and special devotion.

Now I am not suggesting we should not be fasting for Lent. Giving something up is a positive spiritual discipline, and it helps focus us on the sacrifice that Jesus made for us. I am giving up some favoured indulgences until Easter. But not coffee.

I cannot think of anything better to give up for Lent than what was suggested by Pope Francis in his message for Lent last year, in which he lamented how a, "... selfish attitude of indifference has taken on global proportions, to the extent that we can speak of a globalization of indifference".²

Pope Francis said if we are to fast from anything, it should be from indifference towards others. "Indifference to our neighbour and to God also represents a real temptation for us Christians. Each year during Lent we need to hear once more the voice of the prophets who cry out and trouble our conscience... God is not indifferent to our world; he so loves it that he gave his Son for our salvation".³

So what will happen when we fast from indifference to others? In an article in *Time* magazine, Christopher J. Hale suggested that when we fast from this indifference, we can begin to feast on love. "In fact, Lent is the perfect time to learn how to love again. Jesus—the great

protagonist of this holy season—certainly showed us the way. In him, God descends all the way down to bring everyone up. In his life and his ministry, no one is excluded.”⁴

Hale concluded his story with the following challenge, ““What are you giving up for Lent?’ It’s a question a lot of people will get these next few days. If you want to change your body, perhaps alcohol and candy is the way to go. But if you want to change your heart, a harder fast is needed. This narrow road is gritty, but it isn’t sterile. It will make room in ourselves to experience a love that can make us whole and set us free. Now that’s something worth fasting for.”⁵

So while it might be good for our waistlines and our cholesterol levels if we give up the indulgences one traditionally gives up for Lent, it will be good for our souls if we incorporate Pope Francis’ suggestion into our Lenten fasts, and we fast from indifference.

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www.theword.tk

¹ <http://wn.anglican.org.nz/resources/glossary/index>

² http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/lent/documents/papa-francesco_20141004_messaggio-quaresima2015.html

³ Ibid

⁴ <http://time.com/3714056/pope-francis-lent-2015-fasting/>

⁵ Ibid