A Lenten challenge: learning to let go

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Learning to let go

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On a Sabbath day in Nazareth, Jesus found his mission statement. He had been away from home for a while. Now, back among his own, filled with the power of the Spirit, he accepted an invitation from the leader of the synagogue to speak to the people he grew up with. He chose a passage from Isaiah that he and they had often heard. “The spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord.”

This became his mission statement. This quote would set the tone and the direction of his ministry as an itinerant, revolutionary preacher. He would live those words and teach them to others.

His focus would be the poor: in that time and that land — the overworked and unemployed, the homeless, the blind, the lepers, the sick — those on the fringes of society. He would rail against the oppressive structures and imposed observances of the religion of his time — structures and observances that, in his opinion, oppressed and burdened ordinary people.

That was then. How about now? What might we do in order to walk in the footsteps of Jesus? What holds us captive? What holds us back? The answers range from fear and hatred through past traditions to material possessions.

Fear

Fear prevents us from moving forward towards freedom, it clogs our life, holds us down, imprisons us. Fear of people, of situations, of the past, of domination, of historical memories we haven’t come to terms with — all these fears become stumbling blocks, they threaten us. “To him who is in fear everything rustles” (Sophocles). Fear clogs.

Fear of failure prevents us from becoming the people we might be. We’re no longer free to say what we think, to come to a decision. “Fear people’s approval and you’ll meet your prison guard,” said Lao Tse. Jesus did not care much what people thought about him. The only thing that mattered for him was doing the will of his Father.

Fear can prevent us from building an intimate home. So we settle for one where we’re only physically present.

Sometimes the good others are doing gets in our way. We become unable to move on together. “We saw a man casting out devils in your name and we tried to stop him,” said the self-satisfied disciples. “Don’t stop him!” replied their master. “He who is not against you is for you.” “Don’t see him as an adversary. Don’t be afraid he is going to overshadow you,” Jesus seems to say.

He tells us to fear only what can kill the soul. He repeatedly cautioned against fear. “Do not be afraid,” he told his followers on a number of occasions, “Have courage, I have overcome the world.” Free from fear, we can experience each moment to the fullest.

There are questions we need to continue to ask ourselves: How freely do I express my views? What holds me back from doing what I really want to do? If I’m not free how can I contribute to the missionary project of setting captives free?
Hatred

We generally hate what we fear. In a way, therefore, fear begets hatred. And experience teaches that fear and hatred do not house together with freedom and love. A hateful heart is a heart in captivity.

Hatred paralyses. Our real enemies are not those who hate us, but those we hate. They paralyse us, hold us captive as long as we continue to hate them. Anthony De Mello has a beautiful story that illustrates this point: A former inmate of a Nazi concentration camp was visiting a friend who had shared the ordeal with him. “Have you forgiven the Nazis?” he asked his friend. “Yes,” his friend answered. “Well,” he continued, “I am still consumed with hatred for them.” “In that case,” said his friend gently, “they still have you in prison.”

The past

The past is an invaluable gift. We rightly cherish where we’ve come from. It helps us understand who we are. “No one ever told him where he come from, so he don’t know where he goin,’” said Kunta Kinte’s grandmother in Roots. The past is indispensable for our understanding of the present.

But it’s how we remember it, how we handle it, that is important. Haunting memories can disrupt, even destroy, the peace of the present: people or happenings we can’t forget sometimes become a stranglehold. The past can mess up the present. It can become a prison. Much depends on what we dig out from the past, and on how we respond to it. “History may be servitude, History may be freedom,” wrote T.S. Eliot.

Yes, we need to look back, but let it not become an excuse for not moving on. We do not want to end up like Lot’s wife who looked back and turned into a pillar of salt, frozen in time, no longer able to move forward.

We can get pre-occupied with the past and worry that it will bring to light what we might want to leave buried. Like Herod haunted by John the Baptist we end up with a troubled conscience. The past can hold us captive. Memory can magnify misdeeds — making the past a prison riddled with anxiety.

But forgiveness liberates. “Your sins are forgiven. Move on.”

Traditions

When tradition mythologizes “the good old days” it can keep us walking forward, but forever looking backwards. Yes, let’s distil from the past whatever good we can, but let’s not canonize all of it by insisting: “That’s the way things should be.”

Traditions are good, but insisting on them as the only way can make them into dead weights. Jesus accused the Pharisees of forever living out of their traditions. They were fixated on particular practices and beliefs and became immobile, unable to respond to the present. Jesus put it this way: “You make God’s word null and void for the sake of your traditions.”

The time-honoured way need not be the only way. Insisting that it is can lead us into two traps of a backward-looking mindset: sadness and boredom. Sadness occasioned by the thought that the world as we knew it is no more. This leads to melancholy, loss of interest in the present, and loss of the sense of astonishment. The “as it was, is now and ever shall be” mindset confines us to sunset time. Sunset is beautiful — but so is sunrise.

Let us retain a sense of astonishment ever ancient, ever new, ever awesome. We can, for example, see Niagara Falls — for the twentieth time. Why can’t we experience it each time anew as something wonderful? Jesus retained the sense of being astonished.

Material possessions

Our strength as Spiritans is simplicity of lifestyle. If we learn to do without many things we escape the temptation to have more in order to be more — the temptation to think that who we are is a function of the material wealth at our disposal. Another interesting story told by Anthony De Mello: There was an old Grandpa in a home for the aged. His young grandson who had come to visit asked him: “Grandpa, how would you feel if a distant relative left you 10 million dollars?” The old man was silent for a few moments. Then he looked up and said slowly, “I would still be 95 years old.” This wise old man did not see himself being other than he was even with so many millions in his bank account.

It must be admitted that Jesus is a very difficult man to satisfy, a very demanding master: the more he asks of you. “Sell all you have, then come and follow me” — to preach the gospel of simplicity — was his challenge to the disciples.

At what point would we say to Jesus, “Enough is enough”? His demanding answer would be, “The more things you can do without, the freer you become, and perhaps the happier. Things don’t hold the key to a happy life. They get in the way of simple enjoyment in life.” “Learn to let go” was the gospel of a demanding Jesus. Our own founder, Claude Poullart des Places, went from working for the poor to living with the poor because he was able to let go.

Letting go

Jesus gives us a new insight into living life to the full — no clinging to power, no self-seeking. We arrive naked and we end up the way we began — others will decide what we’ll wear and where we’ll be buried. There are so many things we can be perfectly happy without. “Learning to let go” was the gospel of Jesus.

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