

On her Shrove Tuesday Thought for the Day this past week Canon Angela Tilby challenged us about our attitude to Lenten fasting – what we give up. Lent is not supposed to be another annual try at the Boxing Day diet which usually fails. Cutting out something that we know our bodies will benefit from having less of – whether it's sugar, alcohol, meat or chocolate. While this is of course important for our physical health I am not sure that it does anything for our spiritual health other than help of feel self-righteous!

If Lent is about endurance then Mthr Jenn was right on Ash Wednesday when she suggested that this year we may not have the same appetite for Lent because the last 11 months have felt like a Lenten journey with a few months of Mothering Sunday-like reprieve over the summer.

The Church teaches that Lent is a period of fasting and inner preparation for Easter - something which the Church has undertaken since its early days.

The message of true fasting will be illustrated differently in different contexts. And while it is easy to draw a contrast between what a preacher in rural India might say about fasting as opposed to the preacher in a city of plenty, there is the added awareness this past year of the number of people and families in our own city and community who live with empty fridges and queue for Foodbanks. Our own primary school ran a foodbank for most of the lockdown.

Angela Tilby reminded us that fasting was expected of the poor and the rich – the poorly nourished as well as the over indulged. But surely if a Christian struggles to eat a balanced diet with daily protein, as in many poor communities and families, then the call to cut their diet at all during Lent is to miss the point. But it also misses the point when the Christian who has an abundance of food is asked to merely give up chocolate during Lent.

One of the Old Testament readings for Ash Wednesday, the one from Isaiah, explains that true fasting involves doing justice, serving others, rebuilding, repairing, raising up and restoring the lives of people and the society around us.

There is something brutal about today's Gospel reading. Jesus experiences the affirmation of God the Father and sees the Spirit descending, only to be driven out into the wilderness by that same Spirit. The brutality of this act can be gauged by the fact that the word "to drive out" is the same as is used when Jesus later casts out evil spirits. Both Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus is "led by the Spirit" into the wilderness but in Mark's account he is driven or propelled by the Spirit – he's forced out into a barren land.

So Jesus goes into the wilderness, a barren, desolate and dangerous place of thirst, hunger, snakes, scorpions and wild animals. But in the context of the Bible and Christian history the wilderness, or desert, is also a place rich in symbolic meaning – symbolism that is somewhat double-edged.

First, recalling Moses and the Israelites at Sinai, the desert was a place where one might go to meet with God. Indeed the whole Exodus trek from Egypt to the Promised Land, largely through desert terrain, was seen by later generations as a time of great blessing and closeness to God.

On the other hand the desert was believed to be a place where one would encounter forces hostile to God – demons and satanic powers. These ideas are powerfully witnessed to in Athanasius' fourth-century account of St Anthony of Egypt. Anthony left his considerable wealth to pursue a life of prayer in the Egyptian desert and, Athanasius makes clear, that while he was certainly close to God, he also battled with the devil, who sometimes appeared in the form of wild beasts. His struggles were seen as heroic, and undertaken not just for himself, but as part of the ongoing battle for the kingdom of God.

Anthony was part of a powerful and influential movement which has profoundly affected Christianity. Individuals and groups of Christians began to feel called to live out a life of extreme asceticism, often in the inhospitable desert. These desert fathers and mothers, as they are known, starved themselves of food, drink and companionship. They saw themselves as warriors on the front line of the conflict between good and evil, and they trained themselves, through these feats of asceticism, to be dependent on the strength of God alone.

They did not set out to influence the rest of the Church or society. They lived lives withdrawn from the centres of influence at court or cathedral. But somehow their witness energised even those who knew they could never imitate this hard calling.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all know about the temptation that Jesus faced in the wilderness, though only Matthew and Luke have the details. All of them place it directly after Jesus' baptism and at the start of his public ministry. So Jesus goes into the wilderness, driven by the Holy Spirit, with God's words of love and affirmation at the River Jordan ringing in his ears. But it is in the wilderness that he will discover what it means to be the beloved Son of God.

It may seem an odd way to prepare for leadership, by starving oneself, alone in the desert. Jesus prepares for his ministry by making himself weak and utterly vulnerable, as though this is the only way in which he can be sure that the ministry he will exercise comes from God, and not just from his own strengths. He does not spend the time drawing up mission statements and strap-lines or setting goals and targets. Instead, he reduces himself to barest essentials, leaving his character and instincts starkly exposed.

What was being tested in the wilderness was the core of Jesus' being, stripped of all other defences. That core proved to be total dependence on God, his Father.

We are not all called to go and live lives of harsh asceticism in the desert, like the desert fathers and mothers. But in Lent we are offered this challenge – what is at the heart and core of our lives? What would the devil offer to us to tempt us away from God? Do we even know what is essential to us and what is peripheral? Have we ever even tried to live without some of the props of comfort and security that seem to us so necessary?

Thanks to Jesus, we do not have to battle with the devil in the wilderness on our own. We are the body of Christ, and so we share in what Christ has already achieved, without any help from us. But perhaps occasionally we might be called to do our own bit of fighting against evil, for our sake and for others. Then, and only then, perhaps, we shall be somewhere near ready to begin to grow in holiness, to deny the self and to take up our cross and follow Christ.

May ours be a holy and a blessed Lent.