



*Mercy: compassion or forgiveness shown towards someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.*

Lent is a season in which it is easy to develop a punitive attitude to one's self.

“Dang! I failed at my fast – again...I am crap”

“Blast! I forgot that I was not going to have a glass of vino de plonko this evening after spending all day with a large cohort of demanding teenagers...I am such a failure”

We often end up depriving ourselves of the very thing that our fasting is supposed to achieve: increased intimacy with the Lord, increased knowledge of myself and my need for His salvific activity in my life.

This Lenten season I have been miserable at fasting from things that go into one's mouth. At this moment in my life, my capacity for self denial is staggeringly lousy. I make grand resolutions and fail at them spectacularly.

Why?

Several reasons, I think.

Firstly, humility. Humility is knowing who I am before the Lord. And who I am before the Lord is weak willed.

Secondly, humility. I am not as good as I think I am.

Thirdly, humility. I am no better than anyone else.

And then there is mercy. I cannot save myself through the power of my will. I cannot save myself by my efforts at fasting and prayer. Which is relieving to accept because I would so not be saved.

This Lent – my 56th upon this earth – I have come to see that the Lord has asked a different kind of fasting from me. He has taken things from me; he has asked me to surrender to him all sorts of interesting aspects of my life. I have had no real control over any of them. Previously,

I think I would have sat on a dung heap and wept oh woe is me. I would have thought that it was because of my lousy fasting and shallow prayer. This Lent, however, the Lord in his mercy, has allowed me to see that he has asked of me a different kind of fast. He has asked that I relinquish my need of control, my need of knowing, my need of all others apart from Him. And so, I see revealed in a new way, His merciful and tender love for me. He knew before Lent started that He was going to take me on a different journey, and although he has every right to demand that I should pray, fast, and give alms with rigour and in equal measure as justice demands, He has rather tenderly communicated that He has everything in hand after all.

On Sunday after Mass, I had this unexpected meditation in which I imagined that Jesus was down in the undercrofts of a great cathedral. The great cathedral was me, but one of the central pillars was crumbling. I thought of my love of the undercrofts of the giant cathedrals of England and Europe and have been touched before by the giant foundations being necessary to hold up the giant glory above. As I watched him attend to the restoration, he passed straight into the bricks and mortar. Every now and then He stuck his head out, waved and smiled at me, as if to say that He could not imagine doing anything more wonderful. I stood watching, holding a dustpan and brush in my hand...that's all I had to do...a bit of sweeping.

As I beheld the scene, I appreciated that He was going to insert a giant cross into the centre of the central pillar. I thought how poetic it was – the vertical to hold up, the horizontal arms for the breadth of support. I was happy with this, when it suddenly dawned on me that Christ was going to put himself on the cross and stay there! He was going to climb into my foundations and willingly stay on the cross precisely in the place where I am weakest. I promptly wept. I saw Our Lady in The Passion of the Christ in that scene where she lays her ear to the floor under which Jesus is held. I experienced a shocking wonder that He would do this for me...now, there is mercy.

~ Sarah McDonald

*Sarah is married to James and they are blessed with four children. Sarah gained a degree in Education, had a cerebral hemorrhage and returned to study Chinese Medicine and shiatsu therapy. By her account, she wasted her 20s gallivanting around the world before experiencing a conversion in Paris at the 1997 World Youth Day.*

*She and James have recently moved to the foothills of the Snowy Mountains where Sarah teaches grammar at the Augustine Academy Liberal Arts School.*



*Image from the Movie "The Passion of the Christ"*