LENT: St Thomas on The Bourne 2024.

Thank you for inviting me to give this introduction to Lent. What I am going to do is this: firstly, I am going to outline a brief history of the origin of Lent, and then I shall follow that with an exploration of two Lenten themes; more of that in a moment, but first…

The History of Lent.

The first recorded use of the word 'Lent' was at the Council of Nicaea in 325, which was a Council of Bishops convened by the Emperor Constantine to try to get consensus in the Church on matters of faith and practice…it gave us the Nicene Creed. But even in the records of that Council, Lent is only mentioned in passing. If you are interested, it is in Canon 5:

Such as have been excommunicated by certain bishops shall not be restored by others, unless the excommunication was the result of pusillanimity, or strife, or some other similar cause. And that this may be duly attended to, there shall be in each year two synods in every province--one before Lent, the other toward autumn.

Any detective-historian sitting here will soon see that speaking of Lent in this throwaway line implies that it must have been a known element in Christianity for many years before the Council… that is, at a time when Christianity had not become the official religion of the Roman Empire.

But what that detective-historian will also notice is that the mention of Lent comes in a Canon which is about excommunication, the power to exclude someone from the sacramental life of the Church. And why might someone be excluded? For a variety of reasons, but primarily for some grave sin. They would then be required to undergo a period of fasting and penitential exercises before being reconciled at a public ceremony. Meanwhile, they were allowed to attend church, sitting, or standing at the back, but had to leave during the early part of the Mass. They could not receive Communion but there was a moment in the Mass, and that moment varied from church to church, where the Bishop gave them a special blessing.

Then, in the Western church in the fifth century, after forty days of penitence, those who had been excommunicated were forgiven, reconciled by the laying on of hands by the Bishop after the reading of the Gospel, they could then receive the sacrament at Mass. Usually this happened on Maundy Thursday.

Again, the detective-historian will notice several things: 1. a bishop was involved…there must have been many more of them then, than there are now. 2. there is a mention of '40' days of penitence.

40 Days

In the fifth century, Lent began not on Ash Wednesday but on the Sunday known as Quadragesima. And what does 'Quadragesima' mean? Answer: if you count forty days backwards from Maundy Thursday you get to the Sunday which is Quadragesima, the beginning of Lent. And for those who like maths, that works out as follows: five days in Holy Week, plus thirty five days, or five full weeks = 40 days), only later in the seventh century in the Western Church did the beginning of Lent move to Ash Wednesday.

From early times (and the fact is, no-one quite knows the date) Lent was associated with three Biblical events: the 40 days that Moses spent fasting on Mount Sinai before carving the 10 commandments on stone tablets: Exodus 34, verse 28: *He was there with the LORD forty days and*

forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.

It is also associated with Elijah's 40-day fast: You might remember the story. Elijah had upset the Queen, Jezebel, and was fleeing for his life. He went into the wilderness and sat down under what the Bible calls 'a broom tree' and so depressed was he by his sense of failure that he wanted to die. But an angel appeared to him, woke him from sleep and ordered him to eat a loaf freshly baked and to drink a jar of water. This happened twice and then, '*He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.'*

And on the Mount of God in a fabulous story, God revealed himself to Elijah…not in an earthquake, not in a fire but in a still, small voice…., or as the NRSV says, in 'a sound of sheer silence.'

And the third Biblical reference to 40 days is of course, Jesus in the Wilderness. This is Mark's version*: And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

So, the '40 days' element of Lent goes back to those OT and NT times.

Fasting.

And what about the fasting element in Lent? Well. It is worth looking at the Biblical material. In the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, there is no mention of fasting, though it is worth noting that the first dietary restriction was when God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Then we come to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement…as found in Leviticus 16, 29-43…although fasting is not specifically mentioned some have claimed that the prohibition against doing any work probably included eating. The Day of Atonement was about humbling oneself…Psalm 35, 13 says, 'I humbled myself with fasting'. That fasting was known in Judaism is clear; for instance, Joel 1 'Announce a holy fast; proclaim a sacred assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the temple of the Lord your God and cry out to the Lord'. There's no need to go on…but as Christianity grew out of Judaism the *concept* of fasting, especially on the Day of Atonement was well-known. But as Christianity spread and moved more firmly into Greek and Roman territory, did that have any influence on the practice of fasting?

Might Christianity have incorporated some Classical fasting practices from that cultural context? Not so: in Classical Greece and Rome, the opposite was encouraged…feasting was the great social and religious practice. There were a few small cults which practised fasting…but usually only for a maximum of one day. It would need much more research to tease this out, but it seems that it was the Jewish concept of fasting, of humbling oneself before God, that was the theme picked up and developed in Christianity, and the Classical world which it inhabited during the first three centuries had no influence in this regard.

One of the very early documents of the Christian faith, probably composed in the late first or early second centuries, is called the *Didache*, or 'the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles'. It recommended that Christians should fast on Wednesdays (because that was the day on which Judas betrayed Jesus), and on Fridays, because that was the day on which Christ died. And it became a tradition in those first centuries that candidates for baptism should fast. In those early centuries the fast was quite strict…only one meal per day taken in the evening, no eggs; no meat; no dairy products. By the 9th century the rules about fasting became more relaxed, and the fast was broken by an afternoon

meal, rather than waiting until the evening, and by the 15th century the fast could be broken by noon and dairy products were allowed.

Pope Leo the Great in the fifth century recommended that Lent should be a time of preparation for Easter and for spiritual renewal…a kind of annual retreat.

And, for the sake of the historical record, I ought to mention that a service of Commination was mandatory in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. That service took place after Matins on the first day of Lent, and consisted of 'A Denouncing of God's Anger and Judgement Against Sinners': the opening paragraph goes like this*: BRETHREN, in the primitive Church there was a godly discipline, that, at the beginning of Lent, such persons as stood convicted of notorious sin were put to open penance, and punished in this world, that their souls might be saved in the day of the Lord; and that others, admonished by their example, might be the more afraid to offend.*

Instead whereof, until the said discipline may be restored again, (which is much to be wished,) it is thought good that at this time (in the presence of you all) should be read the general sentences of God's cursing against impenitent sinners, gathered out of the seven and twentieth chapter of Deuteronomy, and other places of Scripture; and that ye should answer to every sentence, Amen: To the intent that, being admonished of the great indignation of God against sinners, ye may the rather be moved to earnest and true repentance; and may walk more warily in these dangerous days; fleeing from such vices, for which ye affirm with your own mouths the curse of God to be due…

So, we have seen that fasting and penitence were an integral part of Lent from the earliest times in the Church*,* but I need to add one more reference to the ancient practice of Fasting…and that reference is to the so-called Ember Days (possibly a corruption of the words 'quatuor tempera' = 'four times/seasons'), or the phrase might derive from an Anglo=Saxon word 'ymbren' meaning a circuit or revolution. Traditionally, the Ember Days have been associated with four moments in the Church's Year, viz: St Lucy's Day (Dec 13th), Ash Wednesday, Whitsunday, and Holy Cross Day (September 14th). Each of those days was followed by three days of fasting and prayer…but when that practice began, no-one is sure, though it was well-established in Rome by the time of Pope Leo (440-461), because he preached some Ember-tide sermons….you will be relieved to know that the Church of England in 1976 made the practice of fasting on those days a matter of free choice.

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What is clear from this very brief history of Lent is that its practice has changed and developed according to different cultures and at different times.

But, in general, once Lent had become part of the Church's calendar, it was associated with three themes:

1 Public penitence, and public reconciliation. And, by the way, the move away from public penitence towards private confession and penance only began in the 6th century.

2.Fasting.

3. Spiritual renewal.

I suppose that in our own generation more emphasis is put upon 'spiritual renewal' than on the other two themes.

So, I am going to follow that 'spiritual renewal' theme in what I shall now say…and I'm going to introduce two poems which seem to me to shed light on Lent for our generation.

Here we go:

Ash Wednesday. T S Eliot.

Because I do not hope to turn again

Because I do not hope

Because I do not hope to turn

Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope

I no longer strive to strive towards such things

(Why should the agèd eagle stretch its wings?)

Why should I mourn

The vanished power of the usual reign?

Because I do not hope to know

The infirm glory of the positive hour

Because I do not think

Because I know I shall not know

The one veritable transitory power

Because I cannot drink

There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is

nothing again

Because I know that time is always time

And place is always and only place

And what is actual is actual only for one time

And only for one place

I rejoice that things are as they are and

I renounce the blessèd face

And renounce the voice

Because I cannot hope to turn again

Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something

Upon which to rejoice

And pray to God to have mercy upon us

And pray that I may forget

These matters that with myself I too much discuss

Too much explain

Because I do not hope to turn again

Let these words answer

For what is done, not to be done again

May the judgement not be too heavy upon us

Because these wings are no longer wings to fly

But merely vans to beat the air

The air which is now thoroughly small and dry

Smaller and dryer than the will

Teach us to care and not to care Teach us to sit still.

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death

Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.

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I need to explain that this is the opening section of a much longer poem. It was composed in 1927 when T S Eliot had decided to become an Anglican. And in it you can see the spiritual struggle he was going through…those opening, repetitive lines:

Because I do not hope to turn again

Because I do not hope

Because I do not hope to turn

Technically this form of repeated phrase is called 'anaphora', a Greek word which means 'to bear back'…that is, it refers to repetition and remembrance…and interestingly, it is also used by liturgical scholars to refer to that moment in the Eucharistic Prayer of Consecration when the words of Jesus are repeated by the priest.

What are we to make of this poem?

Those first three lines with their echoing word play about 'hope' and 'turning' set the tone. They refer to Eliot's struggle…a human struggle which we all experience…of hopelessness and the opposite longing for hope. It is agony…because it forces us to consider truth, the very truth of ourselves. And I wonder if Eliot does not also have in mind the concept of 'metanoia', usually translated as 'repentance', but which more accurately means 'changing one's mind', or changing

one's perception…seeing things differently, a fundamental re-orientation of our lives, a kind of conversion.

The repetition of those three lines refer to the battle between the decision taken (Because I do not hope to turn again), and at the same time, the struggle with hope. Have I made the right move? Is this what I should be doing? Have I really changed?

And it seems that he cannot resist looking backwards to who he was before, and yet he also wants not to envy:

Because I do not hope to turn

Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope

I no longer strive to strive towards such things

And looking inwards he reflects upon himself and his limitations…an aged eagle… describing himself in the diminution of his energies and still suffering the old temptations.

(Why should the agèd eagle stretch its wings?)

Why should I mourn

The vanished power of the usual reign?

And he is caught, trapped, recognising his awful human limitations, such that he cannot know in full those moments…*the infirm glory*… which promise so much spiritually, but which he cannot comprehend…*because I know I shall not know the one veritable transitory power…*the glimpses of meaning are transitory, one minute here, the next minute gone, and he cannot find the source of the water of life …is that source real? Sometimes it seems to be the only reality and at other times it disappears like a will o'the wisp.

Because I do not hope to know

The infirm glory of the positive hour

Because I do not think

Because I know I shall not know

The one veritable transitory power

Because I cannot drink

There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is

nothing again

He struggles with what he knows earthly reality to be… time and place…they are real… but only real in a transitory sense:

Because I know that time is always time

And place is always and only place

And what is actual is actual only for one time

And only for one place

I rejoice that things are as they are and

I renounce the blessèd face

And renounce the voice

Because I cannot hope to turn again

Now, here is where I struggle to understand the poem: what does he mean by renouncing the blessed face? Is that about his renunciation of the world? Or is it about the renunciation of Christ? Or, paradoxically, both…it echoes what is called the *Via Negativa…*that way of thinking about God by means of negation. Anything I say or think about God is necessarily untrue because of my human limitation. How can you and I who are finite, comprehend infinity?

And this first section of the poem ends with these lines in which he begins to realise that he has spent too much time thinking about himself and his intellectual struggles, and instead just throws himself upon the mercy of the Almighty, using traditional liturgical words… He realises that he has to be still and wait in that stillness upon the mercy of God.

Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something

Upon which to rejoice

And pray to God to have mercy upon us

And pray that I may forget

These matters that with myself I too much discuss

Too much explain

Because I do not hope to turn again

Let these words answer

For what is done, not to be done again

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The air which is now thoroughly small and dry

Smaller and dryer than the will

Teach us to care and not to care Teach us to sit still.

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death

Pray for us now and at the hour of our death

Well. And this is only the first section of the poem…you will be glad to know that I am going to leave that poem there. But does it not, like a probing surgeon, reveal who you and I are? We strive to know, yet we cannot in fullness know; we are troubled by our past sins, which may be our besetting sins still; we want to bring ourselves to God but are pulled back towards the world. In the end we have to wait in stillness upon God…and pray 'Lord, have mercy'. If we don't do anything else this Lent, the repetition of those words might bring us an awareness of our relationship and place with God… our hope and our salvation… God, beyond the power of our reason to comprehend, yet deep within ourselves, in spite of our doubts and failings, we sense that God, the mystery enfolding all mysteries, will, by his grace, have mercy upon us…in and through our Lord Jesus Christ. (2625 words)

And now another poem, and one which is a complete contrast:

It is by U A Fanthorpe, (22 July 1929 – 28 April 2009): U for 'Ursula'; A for 'Askham'. She was born in south London. Her father was a judge. She was educated at St Catherine's, Bramley and St Anne's College, Oxford. She then taught at Cheltenham Ladies College for 16 years before giving up teaching and taking several casual jobs. Her life's partner was a woman called Rosie Bailey who was a Bristol teacher and academic. They both became Quakers in the 1980s. U A Fanthorpe became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and was awarded a CBE in 2001 for services to literature.

Now, if T S Eliot's poetry is multi-layered, polished, and fascinating, U A Fanthorpe goes to the other extreme. Her poetry is very accessible, easily understood, polished with wit rather than erudition. It is poetry which has a kind of twinkle in its eye.

BC:AD

This was the moment when Before

Turned into After, and the future's

Uninvented timekeepers presented arms.

This was the moment when nothing

Happened. Only dull peace

Sprawled boringly over the earth.

This was the moment when even energetic Romans

Could find nothing better to do

Than counting heads in remote provinces.

And this was the moment

When a few farm workers and three

Members of an obscure Persian sect

Walked haphazard by starlight straight

Into the kingdom of heaven.

It's those final two lines which I love… 'walked haphazard by starlight straight/into the Kingdom of heaven…'

I also love the structure of the poem; the first three verses are quietly ordinary. They are about time and change, with nothing of Eliot's agonising, just a description of how life is… like a grandfather clock ticking away in the background.

But the poem is disarmingly and quietly subtle: each of the verses opens with 'This was the moment'…and their repetition (for the happy pedants…*anaphora*) leads us into the rhythm of the piece, and lets the poem develop its pace… a steady, slow ticking of the clock.

But there are subtle and witty disturbances…like, in the first verse, the 'uninvented' timekeepers presenting arms, are they saluting? Is this a reference to the hands of a clock? And in the second verse 'peace' is described as 'dull' and 'sprawled boringly over the earth'. And in the third verse, the word 'counting' is introduced…a hidden reference to time passing?

Then in the fourth verse we have the reveal…what this apparently simple poem has been leading up to…the 'walking haphazard by starlight…' But even here there is a delightful twist: 'haphazard' is immediately followed by the word 'straight'…the one word counterpointing the other. It really is a delight. It makes me smile and warms my heart.

Now, just briefly, think of all those Christmas cards which have the Three Kings walking in single file carrying their presents for the baby. Those cards have tidied up the arrival, turned its haphazardness into a liturgical, carefully choreographed procession. Nothing haphazard about it at all.

So…what has this poem to do with Lent? Well. I chose it to counterbalance the tormented intellectual introspection of Eliot's poem. U A Fanthorpe's poem, it seems to me, is not only about the revelation of a baby at Bethlehem, it is also about our humanity and therefore our attempt to grow towards God.

Lent is often seen as a linear activity. It is forty days long. It moves from Ash Wednesday and ends in Holy Week. It progresses in a strictly chronological manner…and if we aren't careful, we might assume that our spiritual renewal should follow a similar linear path: not very good on Ash Wednesday but by Holy Week stronger and deeper. Maybe that is how it is for some…but I want also to suggest that our journey with God and towards God is also one in which we 'walk haphazard by starlight' …that is, if we are open to the twists and turns of our lives, we might discover within them unexpected, unexplained moments of revelation; moments when we have been taken by surprise. It might be the verse of a hymn; a moment in candlelight, a Biblical verse which stops us in our tracks, a moment of reflection, a burst of joy, a child's laugh, the smile of a wrinkled, elderly face. But there is also a negativity about the haphazard as well: the unexpected serious illness, the sudden death of a beloved partner, the car crash, the disaster which falls upon us out of a clear blue sky. Haphazardness is part of our human experience… for good and ill, and therefore is likely to be part of our Lent.

I cannot begin to predict what the Lent course in the parish will do, I cannot predict the outcome…but into it each of us will bring our doubts and uncertainties, as expressed with such precision by T S Eliot, and we shall also bring our own haphazard walking, as expressed by U A Fanthorpe…but remember it is walking haphazard by starlight… So, there may be something

mysteriously beautiful and infinite for us to encounter this Lent which will help us grow through grace and by his mercy towards God.

I suppose there are two key things for each of us to realise this Lent, firstly, God is not only the end of our quest, God is also within the quest itself…whether that quest involves the inward awareness of our own tangled humanity, as we found it in T S Eliot's poem, or in the outward awareness and quiet gentleness of 'walking haphazard by starlight'. Let me repeat: God is in the quest and is the end of that quest.

Secondly… as always, God is waiting for us: just as these poems have been lurking on paper or on the web for many years and have only become real for us when they were brought to our attention… so God, with infinite courtesy and patience waits for us to approach him, and as we approach, so God comes towards us…with wounded hands outstretched. In Lent we are allowing God to bring us home.