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The Communion of Anglican Churches

**A Reflection on Shrove Tuesday and the Season of Lent**
In the back of my mind I carry a picture, probably from a 1950’s Life magazine, of a group of British ladies running down a lane in an English village, all carrying cast iron skillets and flipping pancakes. It is a classic photo of a once common aspect of bucolic life in the United Kingdom. Shrove Tuesday is in the British tradition of celebrations like Twelfth Night, Guy Fawke’s Day and Morris Dancers, a poignant reminder of an earlier age which we tend to think of as more innocent than our own. But only Guy Fawke’s Day is free of the taint of a checkered, pagan history.

Shrove Tuesday takes its name from practice of hearing confessions during the two days before Ash Wednesday. Shrove-tide was in place from at least the time of Alfred the Great. Shrove Tuesday was the last day for a person to be shrived before Lent. But the pancakes were there long before the Angles and Saxons displaced the Celts. When England was still Albion, even before the Romans invaded, in pagan times oak cakes were baked in honor of Bridget, the cereal and fertility goddess of Northern Europe before Christianity claimed dominion. Wisely, I think, the early Church kept the custom of racing through the village with a sample oat cake that demonstrated first, that the hamlet had weathered winter and second, that they had enough food stocks to last until the next harvest, and third, that they were banking on Bridget to give the a bountiful harvest. The Church turned pagan Bridget into St. Bridget and her traditional homage was broadened to offer the comfort of confession before Lent to those who needed it.

And until nearly the 1200’s, in England, confession was not a private matter. The penitent and the priest sat on a bench, in front of the altar, facing the congregation, and the whole matter was aired for all to hear, and all to forgive. It took a very brave soul, or a very guilty one, to endure this process and although English history is replete with many guilty souls, confession was rarely heard because congregations were loath to forgive what they might have tolerated had they only surmised what the rascal had done and not had the hard evidence of his (or her) admission of guilt. After 1215, confession became a private office to which every baptized Christian in the West was obliged to repair at least once, but preferably three times, a year, Shrove-tide, the two day opportunity to be shrived, largely disappeared and only the quaint custom of ladies carrying hot oat cakes through the village remained .

Lent itself is an anthropologically interesting season. The work “Lent” is derived from an Anglo Saxon term “lecncten” which means spring. The practice of fasting as a discipline prior to Easter for a period of forty days only dates to around 300 A.D. Whether you think that this annual sacrifice of springtime fasting began as an attempt to build discipline among the Christians who faced persecution under the Romans or as an ecclesiastical prelude to celebrating Jesus’ Resurrection depends on from which historical font you choose. You may favor the rationales offered by Saints Jerome and Augustine, who think it began as a period of fasting of an undetermined length during the reign of Galerius. However, Dionysius of Alexandria, claims it was a weeklong affair dating from the 200’s, but Dionysius points out that was not a universal practice in the Church in the Eastern half of the Roman Empire. The occasionally heretical Eusebius, on the other hand, claims it began with the Council of Nicaea in 325, and, indeed, fasting is mentioned in one of the canons of that conclave. . It is reasonable to suppose that the practice of fasting began in different places at different times, and that in each place fasting may have been subject to rules unknown elsewhere. Uniformity was not a Christian virtue until Constantine decided that the now legal Church was a part of the imperial structure of governance. Well, that was what he wanted, but like King Canute’s attempt to order the tides, the writ of even the most powerful monarchs had limitations. The further one traveled from Constantinople, the less uniformity one encountered.

Generalizations are, therefore, dangerous but a necessity. In the beginning, fasting was an individual spiritual exercise and only became a community wide project sometime in the early 200’s. An individual who fasted abstained from eating meat, fish, eggs, and dairy products for forty-eight hours at a time, but during that time the person fasting could consume nuts and berries, fruits and cereal products, washing them down with water – if it was safe enough to drink - and beer, mead or wine if the water posed a health risk. At least in England, beer or mead for a break in one’s fast was highly probable – at least for the aristocracy. But by 500 A.D. wine was exceedingly rare in Northern Europe and beet or mead was by then a stable commodity for communion as a substitute for wine. That said, the Eucharist was celebrated by the priest who consumed the elements on behalf of the congregation, so, who knew? Not until the 900’s was communion celebrated daily even in well run monasteries, and the first side chapels that allowed multiple monks to celebrate a Eucharist at the same time in the same church did not appear until the late 1000’s. But in the 600’s Europe had begun to experience what has often been called a mini-ice age. The average temperature dropped as much as three to five degrees. Winters were beastly cold, springs and summers were so rainy that crops rotted in the fields, cattle starved, and famine stalked the continent north of the Alps. The much maligned period gave rise to the term, the “Dark Ages” which is often misapplied to cover the whole Medieval era. But from the mid 600’s to the late 800’s, in order to cope with the uncertainty of the food supply Lent was extended to include those curious Sundays called Septuagesima, Sexagesima, Quinquagesima and all the days in between them. But in some areas of Europe Lent lasted even longer. Where the early Anglo Saxon Church had made Sundays feast days, the inclement weather of the Dark Ages made saving food stocks until the next harvest a necessity, feasting became a real burden. Nursing mothers, the aged and infirm were permitted to nibble a bit, but even the amount of vegetables the compliant Christian faster could consume had been restricted. An economic recovery began in the 800’s with the return of warmer weather and the later Middle Ages saw a return to prosperity but the rigorous Lent of the precious century retained much of its recent rigid character.

Happily, the earth warmed up a bit by the late 800’s and the Church in the West very slowly modified the rules regarding fasting. So, by 1200, whether your parish church or monastic abbey celebrated a Lent that began with Ash Wednesday or commenced three weeks earlier depended largely upon where in Europe your DNA was to be found. The warmer the area in which you lived the shorter your Lent. In England, as usual, they did Lent both ways because “we have always done it this way” is the unspoken, unwritten rubric that governs Anglican liturgics. Of course we may only “always done it this way” for at least the past three years, but by then it is a hallowed tradition. The mini-ice age had lasted longer that the Hundred Years War and its scars healed with glacial speed.

So, now, what is it that you are obliged to give up for Lent? Meat, fish, eggs, cheese, butter, milk, the traditional monastic forbidden fruits? Some are more likely to choose chocolate, some avoid desserts, a few give up Lent. Might I suggest a few things we might all strive to give up as a Lenten discipline – and keep giving up after Easter?

Fearfulness. Our society is self-besieged with impending or possible disasters. We are bombarded daily with media accounts of an infinite number of potential or actual threats to health, life, limb, happiness and to the successfulness of the Chicago Cubs in making it to the World Series. There isn’t much we can do about asteroids, earthquakes or hurricanes and the Chicago Cubs may actually deserve to be lumped in with these other “natural” disasters. We can pray for relief from visitations of these afflictions but we cannot prevent them from running their course. So, we need to focus on those things which we can actually influence. It is unlikely that we can change the world but we can, occasionally, change ourselves. We can be loving, generous, thoughtful, kind, considerate, courteous, cheerful, and hopeful. We can visit the lonely, the ill, the aged and those in prison. We can provide food for those in need, shelter for the homeless, hope for the addicted and we can mentor children. We can display courage in the face of a very strange universe where order and chance seem oddly paired.

Righteous indignation. Yes, the world seems populated with people who are crude, cruel, indifferent, narcissistic and ill mannered. That is because they are crude, cruel, indifferent, narcissistic and ill mannered. And boors are not receptive to the suggestion that they are, in fact, boors. Pointing out to a gang member that his drooping drawers are unsightly, reproving someone for an intemperate display of curses, the mild suggesting to a human camel that spitting on the sidewalk is unhygienic is not likely to improve the character of the oaf and it may have consequences which will require serious prayers on your behalf. As feeble as it may seem, we need to notice that which is good and foster it – nurture that which good the way we would cultivate a rare plant. That was how the early missionaries convinced our ancestors to become Christians. Not saints – except for Bridget – just tepid, mediocre, and believing despite their doubts - Christians. A modest improvement, any at all, is a major triumph for Christianity in this secular society.

Smugness may be defined as our certainty of the rectitude of our judgements, judgements based on our misperception that reality consists exclusively of the sum total of our experiences, assumption and prejudices. Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Not small time, “I did not put a quarter in the parking meter” sinners – but horrid, awful, sinners who don’t bathe frequently enough. Oh, yes, of course he came for you and me and certainly the city ought to be more understanding when we run in to a store for just a few minutes and we can’t find a quarter, and, yes, it did take just a trifle longer than we intended but, surely, that is not the same as doing something terrible? Well, yes and no. A lot of little things add up – in part because we forget we have done them, feel no stress, no guilt – well, maybe a little guilt. That attitude that precludes being in community – which prevents being in communion with others. None of us is inherently better or worse than the rest of humanity. Mark Twain may not have been an apostle but he got a lot of things right, among them his bon mot: “Being human isn’t a hanging offense, but it is nothing to brag about.” And we are all merely human and most of us are barely Christians – as some of our other fellow Christians see us. But as imperfect as we are, we are Christ’s sheep and it is he who is our judge and not our brethren in the faith. We must pray for those who do not love us as ardently as we must pray for those who do.

Poor me! This is that self-deprecating attitude that says, “I am just a helpless individual, nothing special. A person of whom the New York Times has never heard, will never hear, and would not know what to do with or about me if they did encounter me. My ministry is insignificant.” The New York Times prints all the news that fits next to all the advertising it can sell. The secular media is not a valid mirror of your importance to God. Where ever you are, whom ever you are, you have value because God has created, you, sustained you, and called you to his service. If you need to rule an empire in order to be satisfied that you matter, then you are in big trouble .It won’t help. Emperors, tyrants, dictators – even elected leaders – are often exceedingly insecure and require constant reaffirmation of their importance. Often they do outlandish things, foolish things, either because they think they are not governed by moral or legal constraints or because they want to see whether they are really as powerful as their followers tell them they are. But when they pass from the scene they are easily replaced by people who, strangely enough, do not seem to be a vast improvement on the morality or expertise of the previous occupants of those positions of power so recently vacated. Dare to love. Love is a transformational activity. It is God’s love for all of us that is at the heart of the Gospel. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to redeem us – all of us. Therefore, we need to try to love others as God has loved us. For in attempting this daunting task we offer God our love in response to his, pallid shadow although it is of God’s love of us, but it is the best we can manage. The measure of your life, the value of your ministry, is not quantified by any scale applicable in this world. You may not entertain angels unaware of their nature but you do serve men and women who, otherwise, often would not be served at all. Your ministry is not important; it is vital. .

But if you must give up something for Lent as a spiritual discipline, something that is simple, concrete, but has tangible value in this culture, life without chocolate can be borne for forty days – with Sundays off. I could live without chocolate. Life without huckleberry pie, however, well that would be very difficult – for me if not for you. Acknowledging, our different needs, let us remember to pray for one another in this season of Lent; forgiving each other for being merely human; forgiving those who have given us offense; thanking God for those who have entered our life and brought us joy and love and for those God has called home to their Resurrection and life eternal. Lent is not about what we must give up to be better Christians. It is about focusing on being the best Christians we can be despite being all too human, so very desperately in need of his saving grace.

Until Easter, and then, always thereafter, God be with you.

Your fellow servant,

+ John D. Keliher
Moderator