

St Luke's in the City  
Last Sunday before Lent  
18 February 2007  
Celebrating at the CROSSroads

Dear Friends,

*Lent tended to connote a certain religious strenuousness, a kind of muscular piety. Strict fasting. More prayers. Regimented reading. Study groups. And a great deal of chatter about what was being 'given up for Lent'. The latter seems to have given way to chatter about what one is going to 'take on for Lent'. Instead of giving up chocolate or some other 'luxury' for Lent, taking on some charitable or noble act for Lent. No doubt both these stances hold truth. Lurching from one stance to the other is probably inevitable at this time in history— a time of extremes in cultural and social practices as we react to some outmoded tradition by over-reacting, only to discover that there was some wisdom in the old dispensation after all! It helps to remember that for each of us there will be the stance that is needed because of our particular circumstances - a necessary relinquishment of something which controls us, a necessary taking on of something which we have avoided. Perhaps both!*

*These outward attitudes and practices do have their proper place. And the Scriptural warning is absolutely correct – “Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them.” But it would be a mistake to reduce Lent to a collection of 'practices' or behaviours. The great 20th century advances in behavioural psychology are to be celebrated, but its limits are all too apparent, and were anticipated nearly two millennia ago by St Paul – “I do not understand my own actions... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” We do not consist merely in a collection of behaviours. No matter how hard we try we cannot 'sort ourselves out' just by modifying behaviour. Neither giving something up nor taking something on – important though each movement may be - will not of themselves solve our inner conflicts.*

*Beneath 'behaviour', beneath the visible and external aspect of our lives there is a depth, a largely unknown and almost completely hidden self – the one which St Paul recognised to be beyond the control of rationality and sheer act of will. This hidden and powerful inner reality seems to threaten our composed exterior, the carefully-constructed image we like to convey to the world. Paradoxically, and mysteriously, this same inner being is the secret key to our truest self, the source and energy of the unique contribution each of us can make. It is this inner being who beckons us. Lent is a call to go with courage and hope into our own depths. Every year the first Sunday gospel in Lent is the story of Jesus facing the trial of wilderness, to encounter his hidden self, to be tested by that which seems to threaten him – and there to encounter his true being. Jesus' capacity to undertake his mission, to set his face to Jerusalem and to triumph over suffering and death is not simply a matter of disciplined behaviour, but arises from encounter with the depths of his inner being. And what is true for the Son of Humanity - Emmanuel, God with us, Word made flesh – is true for us also.*

With my love, David