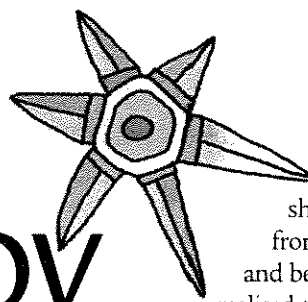


Season of joy



Far from being a sombre season, Lent is a time to remember who and what we are and to return to our roots and rejoice

By Fr. Jude Winkler OFM Conv.

LENT IS NOT often considered to be a joyful season. Most people consider it to be sombre and even somewhat depressing. It is almost as if joy ends with Mardi Gras and we cannot smile again until Easter morning. All throughout Lent we hear that we are sinners and need to change our ways before it is too late. Our devotions centre upon the passion and death of Jesus (e.g. the Way of the Cross). Even the initial symbol of Lent, ashes, is a reminder of our frail human condition – that we are dust and unto dust we shall return.

Old Testament background

All of this is true, but there is also a much more positive dimension of Lent. Lent is a time to remember who and what we are and to return to our roots.

There is an Old Testament festival that helps us to understand this: the Feast of Booths. This feast was originally an agricultural feast. It celebrated the harvest season when people would live in booths alongside the fields they were harvesting.

But the feast took on a new meaning in light of the experience of the people of Israel after their exodus from Egypt. The people of Israel lived in tents while they wandered in the desert. God had freed them from slavery with awesome signs of power (e.g. the ten plagues, the splitting of the Red Sea, etc.). But now they were living in the desert – a tremendously inhospitable place. They had no food or water. There was little protection

from their enemies. The Israelites had to depend upon God for everything, and God provided them with everything they needed. God gave them manna and quail to eat. God gave them water from the rock to quench their thirst. The people of Israel would not have survived a moment but for the grace of God.

Things changed when the Israelites entered the promised land. They could now grow their own crops. They could build fortified cities and protect themselves against their enemies. Their lives were no longer so precarious. Yet there was a danger in this. The Israelites began to rely upon themselves. They became self-sufficient and arrogant. They were caught up with what they possessed and began to act as if they were the masters of their own destiny.

So, once a year, the people of Israel would ritually return to the desert by living in a tent for a week during the Feast of Booths. The provisory nature of the tent reminded them of their dependence upon God. It reminded them of the tents in which they lived during the exodus. Life in the tents was necessarily simpler (for they had so little). Living in the tents during the Feast of Booths allowed the Israelites to return to that simplicity they had experienced in the desert.

Hosea

This same sentiment is found in the Book of the Prophet Hosea. The prophet Hosea married a woman named Gomer who was unfaithful. No matter how much he forgave her,

she would turn away from him again and again and betray him. The prophet realised that his experience was a parallel to what God was experiencing with Israel. God loved Israel and protected her, and yet she had turned to pagan gods and sinned against Him. The very gifts that God had given her (her food, her drink, the land) had become distractions. Israel was more concerned with what she had than whom she had become.

Yet, the prophet still loved Gomer (even as God still loved Israel). He would take her back and try to rekindle their love. He (both Hosea and God) would lead her to the desert where they had first fallen in love. The desert experience is not portrayed as a time of deprivation – it was the time of simplicity. It was a time when the beloved would not be distracted by what she owned or had to do.

A second honeymoon

This biblical image of returning to the desert is similar to our modern practice of celebrating a second honeymoon. While the early days of marriage involve the challenges of adjusting to a new life style and struggling to make ends meet, it is also a time that the couple remembers with affection. It was a simpler time when the couple does not have all that much, but somehow it was enough because they had each other.

But then life became more complicated. The couple owns more and has more to do, but it does not necessarily make them more joyful. They feel frazzled and unable to find peace.

This is why they often take a trip (a second honeymoon) to rekindle their first love. They leave all those things which have complicated their lives so that they might get to know each other again. In a sense, they are trying to rekindle the conditions in which nothing else was as important as the other person.

These images can help us to understand Lent as a season of joy. Lent is a type of Feast of Booths or a

second honeymoon.

We live complicated, busy lives. We often let things become too important (e.g. food, drink, TV). We tend to judge ourselves and others by how much we or they possess. We desperately need a bit of time when we can step away from all of this and gain perspective. We need to pull back and catch our breath lest we get so lost in what we are doing that we end up surviving from day to day and not really living.

Creating a desert

This is why we try to simplify our lives during Lent. We give up things because they too easily get in the way. These things are not evil in themselves, but they often become too important. They are distracting our attention from what (who) is really important. In a sense, by giving up these things, we are creating a desert for ourselves where we can meet God face to face.

This is also why we work to remove sin from our everyday lives during Lent. Most of us are not great sinners. But even if our sins are everyday, garden variety venial sins, they nevertheless get in the way. In the desert, one has to focus one's attention on what is really important. We cannot afford to waste time and energy on things that do not give life. Sins, by definition, cannot give life. Its promise for joy is an illusion (a mirage), because it always leaves us emptier and lonelier.

Once we have created a desert for ourselves, we can dedicate ourselves to

strengthening our relationship with God. We do not give up things just to prove that we can do it. We give them up to leave room for God.

This means that we should spend more time praying. This could take the form of spending more time in private prayer, or going to Mass every day, or participating in the Stations of the Cross or other Lenten practices. It is important, however, not to do too much. Otherwise, we will be filling in our desert with more things to do.

We can also commit ourselves to study. A honeymoon is a time to get to know one's partner better. God should be that partner in our lives. Churches often have weekend or day retreats, adult education classes, and spiritual reading available during Lent.

Acts of charity

There is one dimension of Lent that at first glance might not seem to fit into this symbolism. That is the idea of Lent being a time for acts of charity. If Lent is a time to simplify our lives and to centre our attention upon God, where does charity fit in?

Yet this is a misunderstanding of what happens when one falls in love. True love does not shut others out. It is fruitful and wants to share the goodness that one has found.

This is why Hosea speaks of a new covenant being established in the desert. It was not enough for God and Israel to be in love with each other. They had to share their love with others. Their love would create a new cov-

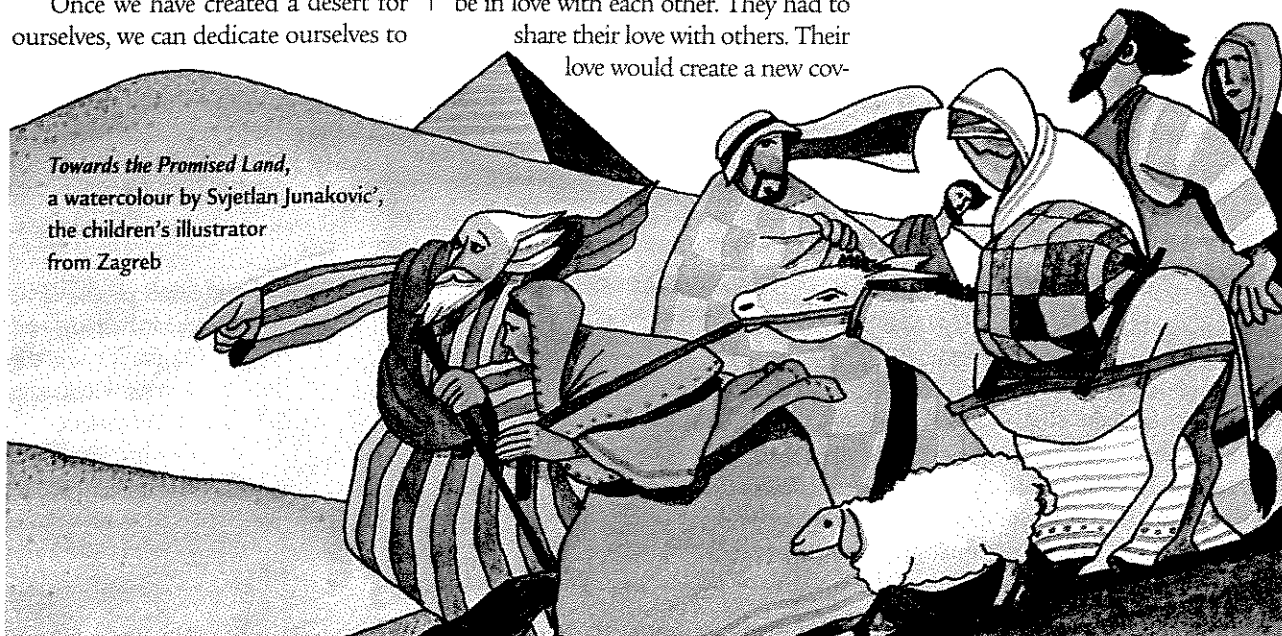
enant of peace with all of creation. The entire world would experience the effects of the love between God and Israel. True love has to be shared with others.

This is why we perform works of charity during Lent. The more we love God, the more we love God's children. What makes Lenten acts of charity different is our motivation. We are performing works of charity not out of a sense of obligation, but rather as an expression of our love. All too often people do acts of charity to feel better about themselves. Even their charity is a subtle act of selfishness.

God-centred charity is not about feeling good, it is about sharing the love we have experienced in God. We will know that our actions are truly motivated by love when we are grateful to those whom we are serving (much as one is grateful to the one whom one loves even when we are serving that person).

This is why Lent can be understood as a time of joy. It is a season when we can get rid of the distractions and remind ourselves of what is really important. It is our chance to fall in love with God again. It is even a chance to express that love in acts of charity. Given an opportunity like that, who would not be joyful?

Even if Lent is a time when we go out into the desert, we are not going out into a wasteland. Lent is more of a tent or a second honeymoon - a time to fall in love again. ♦



Towards the Promised Land,
a watercolour by Sijetlan Junakovic',
the children's illustrator
from Zagreb