

Observing Lent in an impenitent world

by Kelly Klages

Today's world feels more and more polarizing. Hostilities and rage seem to always buzz, especially if you're a frequent consumer of social media. The ideas of repentance and forgiveness have fallen by the wayside, frequently misunderstood or even vilified as a sign of personal weakness, complacency, or anti-justice. Those who deign to admit they were wrong and try to make amends are still pilloried. In a world without forgiveness, there are only eternal grudges, debts that can never really be repaid, and perpetual self-justification. When the only recognized kingdom is an earthly one, there is only Law, and the result can be merciless.

But Christians are citizens of another kingdom as well, one ruled solely by grace. Our faith is built on forgiveness, and this calls for humility—a willingness to confess where we have broken God's Law, and to cling to the Gospel of the forgiveness for that sin through Jesus' atoning death. This doesn't mean rejecting God's rule in the temporal realm and our participation in it (what theologians call "the kingdom of the left hand"). On the contrary: only by forgiveness, reconciliation, and communion with Christ through His Church (the "kingdom of the right hand") are believers strengthened and empowered to live grace-filled lives of love and service to our neighbours.

This winter, to combat the spirit of cultural burnout among us and its brutal promotion of gracelessness, here are some ideas to help us refocus on forgiveness. Included are not only spiritual disciplines, but also some practical personal habits that can help facilitate these disciplines and seeing the "bigger picture."

- Ash Wednesday is on St. Valentine's Day this year. Show your love for family and loved ones by taking them to church! If you're in the habit of making elaborate plans on the evening of the 14th consider switching those plans to a different day of the week.
- Mark your church's midweek Lenten services on your calendar. It's a step towards prioritizing spiritual growth within your own congregation, and by extension the millions of Christians who are joining together to focus on Christ's Passion in this season. Communal faith is necessary for believers and reminds us that spirituality is much bigger than our individual selves.
- Consider listening to portions of the Bible this Lent. Listening to God's Word has advantages— it is how the Word was originally meant to come to us ("So faith

comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). It also forces us, whose ears may have grown dull in a sound-bite world, to focus. It

is good practice for listening to the audible Gospel in church and to our own family and neighbours throughout the week. Audio Bibles are available for purchase, or for free on sites like www.Biblegateway.org.

- Here are few devotional reading recommendations: Reading the Psalms With Luther, Sacred Meditations by Johann Gerhard, Authentic Christianity by Gene Veith and A. Trevor Sutton, The Story Bible (for children) all available from www.CPH.org.
- Step out of the rage machine. If there is a media outlet, online or otherwise, that merely raises your hackles and promotes your own self-righteousness, turn it off. Discover the "mute" and the "unfollow" settings on your social media. Listen to others and consider different opinions, but find those who can do so in reasoned, civil tones, not in conspiracy theories or shrill outrages-du-jour.
- When it comes to reading for entertainment, try something old. React against the endless, often-trivial stream of the "now" in favour of what's stood the test of time. Reading old books is a great way to gain humility and perspective about our own era. You may discover surprising themes of faith as well as finding new favourites. Another benefit? An amazing amount of the greatest literature of all time can be found free online.
- Cultivate gratitude and giving. Make donating to a charity a family project this year during the forty days of Lent. Grab some note cards and send some thank you notes to those who have blessed your life.
- Pray for the person you are least interested in praying for. Not praying in the style of the Pharisee of Jesus' story, "Lord, I thank you that I am not like other men," but in positive terms, as if they were already a friend. You may know the verse, "Be still, and know that I am God." Read its context in Psalm 46, and you will find God speaking of how He shuts down the rage machine on a massive scale. As God-With-Us, Jesus entered our raging world to save us and to be our fortress and comfort. That promise is ours this Lenten season and throughout the year.



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