

ENQUIRE WITHIN

Question: *Don't you think that the traditional idea of observing Lent as a season of self-denial and Bible study is now so much out of touch with modern life as to be in need of being dropped altogether or at least having a radical change?*

Answer: Yes, the concepts of self-denial and Bible study are a bit out of touch with the modern world, but it is the modern world which is losing out from this situation. It is partly the television and the arm-chair culture which we have developed into, and partly the boom in individualism which makes everything out to be "my decision" and nothing to do with anyone else, so leave me alone, thank you.



How many times I have heard the question, "Did you see that programme last night about..." Our intellectual needs seem to be satisfied with television programmes about serious matters and religion, but the medium of television is such that it cannot avoid trivialising the issues and short-changing the viewer.

Or else we look something up on a website like Wikipedia and then fool ourselves into the feeling that we have done research.

Difficult issues require difficult things like reading books, studying with care, and speaking to others about them in a restrained and disciplined manner.

If you want to sail through your life without much time given to such things as reflection, review, self-examination and stock-taking, then that is OK.

But if you want to evaluate life and share your evaluation process with other like-minded people, there is nothing to beat a good old-fashioned group discussion, in someone's friendly home, sharing food and drink and giving the issues sufficient time to carefully consider them, comparing notes with other people.

Essentially, Lent is a time for such activity. On Ash Wednesday, the President speaks to the congregation and says:

"I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting and self-denial, and by reading and meditating on God's holy word."

Such an invitation could be a god-send to you and to everyone involved in our church life. Five people have volunteered to host or lead the Lent groups and they present you with a special opportunity to deepen your experience of living because you will be taking time out of every-day living to think about the direction and purpose of your own life. Such a process is clearly valuable because we don't get a second chance.

These days, very few people regard self-denial as a good thing. We are an all-consuming society and we devour everything we can get our hands on. Today, self-denial is a deeply counter-cultural concept which could revolutionise your life and our world.

And I am not pointing the finger! I feel very much part of the over-indulgent society and I feel an inner resistance to being more disciplined and less of a consumer.

But as we know from the state of the planet, we cannot sustain our way of life indefinitely and so the time to change is now.

Reading and meditating on God's word is a rather old-fashioned way of saying that we will all benefit from refreshing our acquaintance with the foundation documents of the Christian Church, hearing again the words of the prophets and the words of Jesus which have so enlightened and excited previous Christian generations. For some people, this may in fact be a first introduction, so I recommend that you clear the diary and make the effort and then feel the benefit of being a part of a time-honoured way of observing Lent.