

*Remember You are Dust....
Recovering the Gift of Lent
for Christian Living*

Fr. Emmanuel Katongole

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Introduction: A Lenten Journey

The idea of writing these meditations first occurred to me when Jeff and Angie Goh invited me to conduct a series of Lenten reflections in the Archdiocese of Kuching in the spring of 2008. The plan for my visit to Kuching was first hatched in the Fall of 2004 at the beautiful resort island of Penang. As we thought about different topics for my talks, the idea of reflections based on the readings of the Sundays in lent came up. In March 2008 I went to Kuching as planned and gave a series of Lenten talks to over 300 people each night in the Cathedral. Even though, the talks went in a somewhat different direction than originally planned, I was determined to have my reflections on lent written out and shared with a wider audience.

Writing these reflections has been a joy – and has offered me an opportunity to reflect more deeply on one of my favorite – if not the favorite season of the church’s liturgical year. In trying to articulate why and what it is I like about the season of lent, I have found

the readings on the five Sundays in lent to speak to me in deep ways – and about my own life’s journey as well as my attempt to make sense of the Christian life.

So what is here is nothing other than personal reflections of the meaning of this season of lent. Do not see them as sermons, but rather as reflections of my own personal journal (and journey) of lent. I hope they are able to speak to you as deeply as they speak to me, or at least evoke your own reflections on lent. Whereas it might be useful and convenient for some people to read through all the reflections at once (in one session), the best way might be to use this book as a companion for cycle A of the Lenten season. As such, reading and reflecting on one reflection every week, might provide a good way think about the season of lent using the five Sunday readings. The first reflection is for Ash Wednesday and this might be best read on the eve of Ash Wednesday, or on Ash Wednesday itself. In order to put the reflections within their liturgical and scriptural context, it is recommended that one first read the scriptural readings of the particular week – which are cited at the top of each meditation.

I am grateful to my friends Jeff and Angie not only for the invitation to Kuching for the Lenten reflections, but also for encouraging me to compile these reflections and edit them as a collection in our CLT series. I am also most grateful for the friends in Malaysia, especially Peter & Martha Yap, who made the Lenten trip to Kuching possible. I am also deeply grateful to Archbishop John Ha for his gracious hospitality.

*Ash Wednesday: Taking Time to
Remember*

Readings: Joel 2:12-18
2 Cor 5: 20-6:2
Mt 6: 1-616-18

Remember you are dust.....

Today is Ash Wednesday. It is the beginning of Lent. I love this season of lent. But I also know that for many people that the season of lent evokes a feeling of desperation, sadness and anxiety. Much of this anxiety of course is easily masked by the hype and intense activity through the disciplines of prayer, fasting and penance.

However, behind the so many decisions and schemes of self-sacrifice within this period, one suspects an anxiety that seems to be connected with the shadow of death. This of course is not surprising given the fact that the most decisive image of lent is ‘ashes’ – a symbol of brokenness, repentance and mortality. And so as we begin the season with the anointing of the ashes on our foreheads, we take the words, “remember you are dust” as a grim reminder about our mortality.

It is not difficult to see how against the background of this warning, the disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving may easily become our attempt to resurrect or to engineer back into life some of the dead areas of our lives, or at least to hold back the power of death.

And so lent easily generates into an intense and desperate time of self-improvement. That is why it often it often turns into a very sad and stressful period. For truth be told, we are already very busy people, trying to make ends meet; trying to secure our lives; to make a name for ourselves...

During lent, instead of doing less of that – we do more – only now we apply the same determined focus for self-improvement on our *spiritual* life. We are determined to improve; to become holier!

But lent is not a time to do more, it is a time to do less.
It is not a time for action, but to cease action;
It is not a time to be busy, but to be quiet;
It is a time to remember...

Yes, lent begins with Ash Wednesday, and the anointing of our foreheads with Ashes: “Remember you are dust...”

But this is not a warning to scare us into shaping up by reminding us of the mortality and judgment awaiting us, but an invitation to remember our beginning; an invitation to remember story of our creation. It is a reminder of who are – gifts created by God – by reminding us of how it all started. It is this Good News, the beauty, the gifts of that beginning that we so often lose in the scuffle of our day to day living.

To say that lent is a time of remembering, is to say it is a time for story telling, or should we say story listening.

We in modern times have so much lost the art of telling stories, and with that the art of remembering. Our lives are so much focused around present and the future that we seem to have no time for stories, let alone stories about a long past.

But that is why lent is so important, to call us back into stories of the beginning, and to remember how it all began.

Having grown up in Africa, I love stories, and something about stories always gets my juices flowing. I especially remember when we were young how in the evenings we would sit around the fire place, and me and my brothers and sister would always beg our parents and other elders to tell us a story. And quite often they obliged. Almost all the stories began in the same way: "A very long time ago....." and then would be filled with the details of "there was a king; or a young girl; or when the lion and goats were good

friends. And we were all ears as we strained to know what happened next...

These were re were almost always all stories of a past long forgotten, of a long ...very long time ago. And as we listened to these stories of “in the beginning’ we were not only entertained, our vision of the present and future, as well our sense of fellowship and community was deepened. All by sitting around the fire and listening to stories.

Lent invites us back to the fire place and into a period of story telling. For Christians, the fireplace is the Bible, and the stories we remember in lent begin with “A long time ago, in the beginning. It is the short form of that story of the beginning is what we hear with the ashes, ‘remember you are dust...’

For the long version of that story you have to go to Genesis 2: 4-25, “at the time when God made the earth and the heavens” – Listen to what happened:

God took the clay – and out of it fashioned man Took Adam; blew God’s breath in his nostrils....

Then the Lord planted a garden
He took the man and placed him in the garden
Then God brought to him all the creatures that God had
made for man to name...
Then God cast a deep sleep on the man and he took one
of his ribs
And out of it God fashioned woman
Then God brought Eve to Adam....

Then took Adam, made him sleep...
Then Good took Eve and brought him to Adam...

Now that is Good News...
That is how it started.
But it also reminder us who were:
Beloved creatures; fashioned by God;
Receiving God's breath.
If you can imagine God taking the finished product,
examining him, satisfied; taking a divine insignia and
making 'proudly made in heaven'. And God saw it was
very good...
Remember that story?
That is what the ashes on Ash Wednesday are meant to
remind us:

Remember you are dust
Each of us, fashioned, made, created by God, out of the
ground.

It is like on Ash Wednesday, God is reminding us:
Remember you are mine, a special, unique creature

Even before you came to be in your mother's womb; I
knew you, I fashioned you

That is indeed God news.

But also the point of us remembering the beginning,
indeed the story of which we are a part is to be able to
trace our way back to God. In order to remind us that
we are pilgrims. The origin of the word 'pilgrim' is
peregrinato or *peregrinus* which means 'an exile in
search for a home'. That is why we need to remember
where we are from – in order to make our back.

Otherwise we live desperate lives, frantically trying to
search for meaning, or give meaning to our lives. As I
was sharing this with my friend Ian Cron, a pastor of a
vibrant non-denominational church in Connecticut

noted how this reminded him of Luigi Pirandello's prize winning play 'Six Characters in Search of an Author'. The play takes place at a theater where a dress rehearsal is underway for a new play. Out of nowhere six characters show up and interrupt it. The stage manager is incensed and demands to know who they are. The group's leader replies that they are characters from another play who have lost their author and are searching for another to finish penning their story. They have to this theater to see if their author is here or if the author of this play wouldn't mind finishing their story and giving them a chance to perform it.

When we too, like those six characters, lose the sense of the play; the plot of which we are apart, we desperately barge into stage after stage looking for meaning, for an author to finish our play or to tell us what part we are.....

That is why, instead of this being a season to do more (an attempt to try to find meaning), Lent is a season to do less; it is a time to remember that we have a story, we have an author. Only by connecting our lives to this story, can our desperate lives have any sense of rest.

Augustine is right in his classical statement: “You have made us for yourselves oh God, and our hearts are restless.” As we all know this confession for Augustine came at the end of a long search for happiness, trying out one option after another.

That is why to say that the period of lent calls us into remembering is to say that this period calls us back into Sabbath (rest).

Sabbat is what God does after he creates heaven and earth and all the contain, and after he creates human being in his image; after he has seen that all God has created is good ... indeed very good, God rested (Gen 2:2)

And so we too are commanded to rest... not simply because we are exhausted and need to be recharged for our next task, but to ‘remember’ God and his creation- which is to say, to remember the author and plot of the play we are part of.

It is in remembering this story that liberates us from the need to prove ourselves by attempting to become somebody. Ash Wednesday reminds us that we are already somebody. God's beloved.

Sabbath thus restores the joy of our being clay – yes, simply clay, mere dust, simple ashes – but who thanks to the work of God's hands, and the breath of God's own life, we are God's precious creature.

But Sabbath – the fact that even God rests – reminds us that this world does not depend on us; that the galaxy will somehow manage without us for this hour, for this day, for this time we are invited, nay commanded to rest, relax; to enjoy our relative unimportance (ashes);

I love the story of John XXIII an old man already when he was elected pope. However, he surprised everybody by his vision and energy. He called the second Vatican council, which many observers correctly interpreted as an a way of opening the windows for fresh air to flow into the church that many had feared was becoming stuffy and suffocated.

But even given his high expectations that came with his calling as the pope, John XXIII we are told, never imagined that the salvation of the church depended on him. After a good days work, we are told, at the end of his night prayers he would add. It is your church, Lord, protect and look after her. As for me, I am going to bed.”

Lent is the time to remember that it is indeed God’s world; God’s creation; that even our lives – are really not our own, but God’s. Lent is the time to remember that Good News, and to let our lives reflect it.

That is what makes Lent; a not a period of action, but more about quiet and silence;

Not about us and our self improvement, spiritual and otherwise; more about God and God’s gifts

Not so much about death, but about life

Not a sad, gloomy season, but a joyous time of story-telling

Lent still requires discipline – but the most crucial disciplines are the disciplines of remembering and of Sabbath.

That is what the ashes on Ash Wednesday are about:
Remember you are dust... And this is indeed Good
News!!!

Week One: Facing Temptations

Readings

Genesis : 2: 7-9; 3:1-7...

Rom 5: 12-19

Matthew 4:1-11:

Then Jesus was led by the spirit into the desert to be tempted

Lent is a time to face the lies, which have become so part and parcel of our lives that we often do not even see them.

We have noted that Ash Wednesday and the period of lent is about remembering the story of our creation. The first week of lent follows up on this story. Listen to what happened next:

Gen 3: Now the serpent was the most cunning of all animals....

He said to the woman

We know the rest of the story.

A lot of ink has been wasted on trying to explain the temptation of the first parents; and a lot of discussions on what exactly what was the sin, or the tree of knowledge of which they desired and ate. When we were young we often wondered and asked if the 'fruit' was just another euphemism for sex!

But in view of the story of creation, the temptation seems to be quite obvious. In the creation story, God's care and providence for Adam and Eve is obvious.

God took the dust and fashioned man;

God then planted a garden for man;

God then brought different kinds of living things for man to name and use as food;

God then fashioned woman and put the two in the garden.....

That is already a kind of down payment; a guarantee if you like and God's promise to Adam and Eve: "I will take care of you... I will give you everything you need."

What the serpent tries (and succeeds in doing) is to convince Adam and Eve that this is not true. Would it not be so much better, the serpent tells Eve, instead of waiting for God (to take care of you), to be able to secure the knowledge of life and death as well as the blessings of life, by yourself? The moment you will eat this fruit, you will know and have the power to determine on your own, what is good and what is bad.

That is the temptation. And temptations are but lies. And Eve fell for the lie. She began to desire the tree of knowledge for the benefits and the power it promised. The real temptation for Eve is in beginning not only to desire the tree of knowledge, but to believe that without it her life is nothing, poor, miserable, insecure.

So she took and ate....

Ronald Rollheiser in one of his books puts it well. The first temptation and sin, he notes is one of grabbing what could only be received as a gift. It is one of substituting a life of gratitude with a life of self-sufficiency!

The effects of this sin is that Adam and Eve's relationships, their way of relating to one another, to God, and to the rest of creation radically changes from one of trust to shame and fear; from one of intimacy and cooperation to one of animosity and suspicion.

This is how scripture describes the scene: "Then the eyes of both were opened...they were ashamed of each other; and when God came looking for them, they hid, because they said, "we were afraid".

In the temptation to be self-sufficiency, what originally had been given as gifts are now transformed into curses: the gift of God; sex; creation, work, death...

This story is told not to assign blame for all our sins and shortcomings to the fault of Adam and Eve, but to recognize ourselves in their story. To see that their

temptation is what we face daily. For like Adam and Eve, we do not want to be creatures; not to be dependent on God or on one another; but to be self-sufficient; to secure meaning for ourselves; to be autonomous.

And so, we work hard not only to satisfy our needs, but also to try to make to make a name for ourselves, by acquiring money, power and influence. But even as we do, we never, at any one particular time feel satisfied. Even as we acquire more of these, we are constantly haunted by the feeling both imaginary and real that our lives are empty, boring, poor, miserable, and sad. It is this feeling that the commercial world exploits by promising through endless advertisements of products, relationships and possibilities, which are the modern equivalent of the 'tree of knowledge'

Soon (like Adam and Eve) we come not only to believe the lies, but to desire them and to seek them out to fill our 'empty' lives with meaning. But just as in the case of Adam and Eve, the effects of this quest for autonomy and self-sufficiency in our lives, is to transform what

were originally (in the story of creation) given as God,
one another, sex, earth, work, death into curses.

And so we relate to God differently (out of fear)
We view one another with hatred and suspicion
We use, exploit and abuse the earth (environmental
crisis)
Work becomes toil for us
We die cursing...

This is a far cry from the story of creation. What
happened?

Lent is the time to reflect on how far we have moved
from the story of creation. We do so by learning to
recognize ourselves in the story of Adam and Eve. It is
the time to see in their story, the patterns of our
constant temptation to run away from God's gift to us
as creatures; to refuse to be God's children; to refuse to
be 'God's beloved'.

But how do we even recognize that temptation and
name its patterns in our lives? That is why, lent gives us

on this first Sunday not only the story of Adam and Eve, but also the story of Christ's temptation.

Notice how the story of the temptation of Christ is in many ways similar to the story of Adam and Eve. For as Matthew tells the story (Mt 11:4-11), it does not begin with Jesus being led in the desert by the devil to be tempted, but with the story before that (Mt 3:13): Jesus coming into the Jordan to be baptized by John. And as he stepped out of the water, a voice from heaven: "This is my son, the beloved. On him my favor rests." (3: 17)

Immediately after that we are told, Jesus is led by the spirit into the desert. (4:1ff).

In the temptations, what the devil is trying to do is to say to Jesus, "Did God really say that you are God's beloved?" Can't you not see that right now you are hungry (1st temptation); you are really a nobody – who knows you? (2nd temptation); that you have no power and no influence whatsoever (3rd temptation).

The devil is not only trying to convince Jesus that Jesus life is empty and meaningless – but that he (Jesus) can and ought to do something about it. He can *prove* himself. He can become somebody; He can turn the stones into loaves and sustain himself; he can make a name for himself by jumping down from the temple parapet in Jerusalem when everybody is gathered for the festival and everybody will be wowed; he can have all the power he needs – just by one act of worshipping Satan.

It is exactly the same temptation that Adam and Eve faced.

It is exactly the same set of temptations that we face. For in the modern equivalent, the devil is tempting Jesus to prove to himself and others that he can be productive and successful; that he can be popular and famous; that he can be powerful and influential.

For at the heart of our busy there seems to be a nagging emptiness and worry: Am I really successful, popular and powerful? If not, I am then somebody or worth anything? For we live in a world that tempts us to

believe that our lives are not worth unless we are successful and rich (have a lot of stuff), beautiful and popular; powerful and influential. That is what drives us; that is what keeps us up awake at night.

IF Adam and Eve (and we, quite often) succumb to these temptations, Jesus was able to resist them. The crucial question for us: how was Jesus able to see through the lies of the devil and resist the temptations? The clue lies in two sets of practices or disciplines.

First, we are told, Jesus spent forty days and nights in the desert. For Jesus this was a time of solitude; prayer. We live in a busy world that has so much noise that it becomes difficult if not impossible to hear the true story of our lives: “you are dust...; You are my beloved; on you my favor rests”. And because we do not hear that true story we are unable to recognize the devil’s temptations when he tries to convince us that we are a no body because we are not rich, popular, or powerful. Moreover, we live in a fast paced world we have learnt that the only way we can secure success, fame and power is if we are quick, alert and decisive. Accordingly there is no time to process let alone look

back and see what is important in our lives. And so, we act before we are ready; we speak even before we know what to say.

That is why the first discipline we learn from Jesus is to stepping back into a time of quiet; to spend time in a desert; alone. Only when we are quiet; when we cease our relentless activism are able to begin to hear true stories of our lives; and only then are we able to begin to hear and name the lies and temptations. There is Chinese saying to the effect that the beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name.

Lent is the time to practice naming the temptations; the lies, and the false promises that mark our lives.

Secondly, what saved Jesus is that he was able to 'remember' God's story well. He was able to recall the voice in the Jordan: "You are my beloved son, on you my favor rests." And to remember the rest of God story on which this affirmation is based. Thus when the devil tempts Jesus with success – Jesus is able to remember what scripture says: 'man does not live on bread alone'. That is true for each of the temptations. Jesus responds

to the devil's temptations by citing from scripture. It proves how well Jesus knew his scriptures. Because he did, he is able to place the temptation within a wider story of God.

Unless we are able to place our lives within the wider story of God – we are prone to live in the immediacy of the present temptations, demands, desires and whims. This is what makes the temptations even seem more real and urgent and our lives more desperate.

Lent is the time to remember our baptism (our Jordan) and to remember God's story: a time to let that story become familiar again; a time to read scripture and to share the stories of scripture with our children, family and friends. We need this period of lent, if not if not 40 days and 40 nights, at least five to ten minutes of silence every day; a time of solitude and quiet to think, as John reminds us: "of the love that God the Father has lavished on us by calling us his children (3 John:).

We need lent: a time to read and tell the stories of scriptures; to live around scripture. We need lent to learn to name the temptations in our lives; to begin to

face them with the truth that comes from remember God's story- the story of creation- you are God's beloved son. On you my favor rests'.

The more we do so, the more lent becomes not only a period of time, but a way of life; a way of living with a posture of quiet and gratitude; a way of constantly remembering that we are God's creatures; we belong to God – and God has already taken care of us. And that is indeed the Good News of our lives.

*Week Two: A Time to Dream –
Again*

Week 2 of Lent

Readings 1:

Gen 12: 1-4

2 Tim 8-10

Mt 17: 1-9

Abraham, Go forth....to the land I will show you

For many of us, lent is the time to improve our spiritual life. We see the disciplines of prayer, fasting, almsgiving as our way of coming closer to God; our attempt to live a holier life; we realize that our lives have not always reflected the calling of baptism, and so

during lent, we make an attempt to bring our lives more in sync with that calling. Much of that attempt, we often assume, has to do with ‘controlling our desires’; with ‘being good’ with perfection – all of which seems to involve an attempt to stabilize (at least for these forty days) our so often restless lives.

The ideal of a stable, integrated, calm life, free of temptation is indeed very appealing. Christian tradition has so often depicted it as the measure of holiness. Somehow the ideas of holiness and ‘rest’ seem to go hand in hand. Restlessness is often not what we have in mind when we think of holiness. To be sure our previous two reflections on recovering Sabbath and on facing temptation might themselves give the impression that the ideal for lent is a ‘settled’ life. But this is far from the truth.

This is to say that the idea of perfection has played a far more central role than the metaphor of journey in understanding Christian life and the period of lent. True, we talk about the journey of lent, and how lent is a journey of return to the Father, but the emphasis has

so often been on coming home again to the loving embrace of the father and staying there.

1. A time to be restless

But lent is not so much about perfection as it is about restless; it is not the time to be ‘at home’, to arrive, but a time to journey. It is not a time to stabilize our lives; but a time to become unsettled, unhinged; it is not the time to be good; it is a time to be mad.

Just like Abram, whose story we encounter on this second Sunday of lent.

Abram was an old man – in his nineties – but who who even in his old age, could not settle down, but remained a restless pilgrim because of a dream and a promise:

Gen 12; 1-4: The Lord said to Abram:
leave the land of your forefathers and your father's
house
to a land I will show you
I will make you a great nation and I will bless you....
....

And Abram went as the Lord directed him.

We need to make a number of observations that make this story quite relevant for us today.

First, Abraham was not a bad man – a terrorist, corrupt, greedy or murderous man who needed to put his life in order. All we are told is that Abram lived in one place where he had security and certainty, and God said to him “leave everything you have; everything you know; relinquish your security and certainty. I want you to expect more. I want you to go with me on a journey on to a place you have no idea where it is, nor how it is going to be like there, and I want you to move from being settled to becoming a stranger and a wanderer.

I can almost hear Abraham saying: are you serious? I am okay here. I will worship you, but from here. I have everything made; I am ready to retire. You have already given me much more than I could ever ask for or even imagine. As far as I am concerned, things cannot get any better than I have here. And God saying: o yes, there will be a future for you, even better. To live into

that future however, you must leave the good life you have here, so that you can experience God's best.

Secondly, the fact that Abraham is given no road map, except the promise: "come to the land I will show you." This of course is as we know, quite vague. Perhaps that is why in the account of the book of Genesis (Gen 11-16) we see Abram (wandering) moving from one place to another: from Canaan to Shechem, to Bethel, to Ai, to the Negeb, to Egypt; and then returns to Bethel, then to Mamre near Hebron.....

2. No road map; just a promise: Trust me – and glimpses along the way: "Abram come out and see the stars. Count them if you will... such will your descendants go. Glimpses of what might be....

In many ways, Abram reminds me of another old man whom I met at a Gathering our Center for Reconciliation organized in Kampala Uganda in January of 2008. He is Paride Taban, retired bishop of Tolit in the Sudan. For over twenty eight years, this huge country of the Sudan has experienced war, unrest,

famine... And Taban has spent his life as a priest and bishop offering leadership in these most difficult times.

For twenty years, he served under the most intense and difficult circumstances: dodging bullets, hiding from both rebels and government troops, protecting people, arranging food and medical convoys. Suspected by both government and rebels: thrown in prison by Garang the rebel leader who suspected him of undermining him.

When finally a ceasefire was signed between the government and rebels in 2004, Taban was ready to retire. He was not yet quite 75, the mandatory retirement age for Catholic bishops, but he had served long enough moreover under very difficult circumstances and was tired. However, when Rome finally granted his wish to retire, he did not. Instead, he went to the middle of the jungle in the Sudan and founded a peace village,

The idea of peace village came to him in 1999 on a trip to the Holy Land. When he visited the Hebron valley where Jesus wept over Jerusalem, Taban shed tears over the Sudan. And then in Bethlehem, he visited a

peace village and knew that this is exactly what he would do when he retired. This is where he now lives.

In the peace village:

-different tribes; different religions: Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, traditionalists... an alternative to the tribalism and religious factionalism that divides us

2. A time to dream

There is something that is at once puzzling and yet amazing about the likes of Taban and Abram. Old men who cannot retire.

Each because of a dream. For Abram, God's promise:

"I will make you the father of a great nation...."

For Taban: God's dream for God's people in Jeremiah 29: 11

I know well the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare, not for your woe; plans to give you a future full of hope.

What keeps the likes of Abram and Taban restless therefore is not only the promise, but the realization that

the dream, God's dream is bigger than Abram, or Taban.

A dream; so public; so out there...

A dream so bigger than either Abram or Taban;

To Abraham: I will make you a great nation;

I will bless you name, so that others might find a blessing....

Taban too. Asked what keeps him going Taban says: "As long I keep my eyes on God's dream and God's people; God's suffering people, I have no right to give up..."

3. The temptation: Giving up on dreams.

In relation to the challenge of dreams, the temptation we face in many ways is two fold. Either we give up on dreaming and settle in for what is possible; what is realistic, and spend the greatest part of our lives and time dealing with and managing the world as is. Or we simply focus on our 'personal' dreams – dreams for me, myself, my me, my wife, my children, my family, my job. We imagine that when God declares us: "you are

my beloved; my favor rests on you.” That this is simply about us.

In many ways that is Peter’s temptation in the story of the transfiguration, which we read on this second Sunday of lent.

Jesus had led the disciples James, John, Andrew and Peter up a high mountain for a glimpse of the dream. While there a cloud covers them and Jesus is transfigured; he shines, and he is seen standing with Moses and Elijah, and a voice confirms: “This is my beloved son.” The experience is just amazing; splendid. Accordingly: “it is so good to be here. Let’s make three tents here...

In one version of the Gospel (**which one**) The gospel notes that Peter did not understand what he was saying. That, I think is simply a polite way of the evangelist telling Peter – it is not all about you. The dream is not just for you Peter and the few of us here. It is much bigger...

The dream is not for you and your two friends here to claim, and enjoy.

To put it in contemporary terms, the fact that God announces to each one of us: “You are my beloved. On you my favor rests” – that this Good News is not simply about us. The Gospel is not simply to make us who hear it comfortable, it is not another gift to make our life more comfortable, more fulfilled. In many ways, like Peter in the story of the transfiguration, we want turn the revelation that Christianity into a kind of back up – a system of rules, guidelines and beliefs that helps us succeed in life; that helps us to ‘enjoy’ life.

Lent a time to become idealistic again; to dream again.
Lent is a time not simply for personal dreams, but for the big dreams; public dreams;
It is a time to dream God’s dream- dreams that involve us, but which are much bigger than us.
The Christian life is not about safety and security; it is about a dream; God’s dream for the world. For God’s new creation, of which we are invited to be part. And so to dream and become restless for the birth of this new creation; of a new sense of justice in our time; of a new world where the scandalous gap between rich and poor is narrowed; when black and white; Japanese and Chinese; African and Asian come worship together and

offer a glimpse of God's ambitious and scandalous dream for the world;

4. Glimpses: Settling for the glimpses

Moreover, what the story of transfiguration confirms is that God always provides signs of hope on the journey. These signs are however, not the dream; they are simply indications, reminders – yes, glimpses, of the future promised. Just as in the case of Abram, when Abram feels discouraged and unsure of the future promises, even after so many journeys, God invites Abram to come out of his tent and points him to the sky: “count the number of the stars if you can... . Such will your descendants be (Gen: 15:2-6). The stars are not the dream. Abram cannot stay gazing at the stars; he has to keep on the journey.

Because we have lost power to dream God's dream, we easily settle for the glimpses. [Many of us has easily settled for a life of comfort and security. It is also a life that puts us to sleep. We have confused comfort with peace; belief with faith; safety with wisdom; wealth with blessing, and existence with life. We marvel at the](#)

stars – our current accomplishments or achievements; we are easily fascinated by the artifacts around and congratulate ourselves.

In this way we are no different from the people of Jesus time who we are told were marveling at the temple and how it was adorned with wonderful votive offerings.

Jesus warning to them: this temple with all its dazzling beauty will be destroyed.

There is a warning for us in Jesus' statement which confirms that dreaming is not simply an invitation for us, it is a duty; the very mission of the church and of Christians.

Unless you wake up to the task of dreaming, and living into that restless journey of God's dream, God will destroy us.

Lent is the time to wake up to that task of dreaming. It is the time to rediscover that irreverent, rebellious and restless core of the Good News. That is the reason, I say that lent is not the time to be good, but to be mad.

For this madness to be God madness, we need a fresh outpouring of God's spirit like Joel speaks about. On Ash Wednesday we read from the book of the prophet Joel 2:12-18:

“Return to me with your whole heart, fasting and weeping; rend your hearts and you're your garments.. blow the trumpet; gather the people. Assemble the elders, gather the children and the infants at the breast.....”

Taken in isolation, that reading seems to be about guidelines for fasting and practices that we try to mimic in lent. But in order to know why such practices and disciplines are important for Joel, one has to read ahead in the story of Joel – to chapter 3: 1-2: There the prophet declares:

Then, I will pour out my spirit...

So that my young men and women may dream dreams

So that old men and women may see visions

In other words, all the disciplines of prayer, fasting, repentance... that mark the period of lent, have as a purpose, as their goal, the unleashing of the spirit.

That is what lent is about to gather together a community, an assembly, a church, that able to dream again dreams, and see visions.

We see the pattern in Abram's life, who had a stable life, but God called him to walk away from it all to a new frontier.

Lent is the time (as Joyce Rupp) might put it:

...to awaken the dreams in us
That have nearly died.

It is time
To call them forth
To remember
How it felt
To risk all
For the inner vision

And the vision
has wings of wisdom now,
no more excuses
for why dreams
can't be tried.

It is time.¹

Yes, it is lent. To give up the present for the future, it is the time to be mad and restless; a time to journey to a new frontier with the dream of God's new creation.

¹ Joyce Rupp, *Dear Heart. Come Hope. The path of midlife spirituality.* Crossroad, New York, 2006, p.139.

*Week Three: Thirsting for Living
Water*

Readings

Ex 17:3-7:

Rom 5: 1-2; 5-8

John 4: 5-42:

*Sir, give me this water so that I may not be thirsty
again....*

On this third Sunday of lent, we are invited to think about the longing in our hearts. The image of water is used to capture that sense of longing (thirst). What the scripture readings show is that this longing in our lives cannot be satisfied by any ordinary water. Only the one who came from God, Christ, our true living water, can satisfy the longing at the heart of our lives.

At Meribah

The first reading on the 3rd Sunday of Lent is the story of the Israelites in the desert:

The people complained against Moses

Why did you ever bring us out of Egypt

To let us die of thirst in this wilderness...

The place was called Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled there and tested the lord...

On one level, this complaint by the Israelites in the desert reflects a genuine need. They are in the desert and they need water. On another level however, what the story shows is that what is going on is a frustration; a disappointment if you like, that they hoped for salvation turned out to be less than they expected. That is why, the story uses words like grumbling and murmuring. You can almost hear the murmuring going on around the camp:

We thought by coming out of Egypt everything was going to be well

We thought we had freed slavery to come to a land flowing with milk and honey

But here we are in a wilderness,

With little or no water....

What the murmuring reflects is a deep longing that not even water would satisfy. For as we know is that even thought in this particular story God was able to provide water from the rock, the murmuring did not stop; their frustration with Moses and the type of salvation that God offered only increased. It is not a long way from way from Meribah to the slopes of Sinai: when the people lost patience in God (Moses had taken too long to return from the mountain where he was in consultation with God), and decided to make a golden calf – creating a god, who would satisfy their needs

Taken at this level, we should have no trouble recognizing ourselves in the story of Meribah. We find ourselves constantly frustrated by the objects we thought were going to satisfy our longing.

I have not found anyone who describes our Meribah experience as well as Fr. Roland Rolheiser. In a number of his writings Fr. Rolheiser notes that there is a deep wound, a deep loneliness and longing at the heart of our lives. He notes that we wake to life tense, aching and

restless (see, e.g. *The Restless Heart*). We think that our arching and longing can and should be filled. In our longing and loneliness, we dream about a perfect mate who would satisfy our longing; or a perfect job; a good career; a good family, a nice home.

It is as if we are always waiting for something or somebody to come along and change things so that our real lives, as we imagine them, might begin. (*Against an Infinite Horizon*, p.12).

We suffer from a kind of Friday night syndrome (*Forgotten Among the Lilies* 15) – thinking that we are the only ones at home on Friday night, and harboring angry jealousy that somewhere others are enjoying the party. The married imagine those who are single to be better off (and envy the freedom they seem to enjoy); in their turn, the single and celibate envy the married for the intimacy they themselves lack and often crave.

And so we expect more and more from our friends, families, mates, jobs to provide that satisfaction we so desperately crave. If only they would be better than they actually are, we imagine,

The truth of the matter, Rolheiser reminds us, is that our longing is not the type that can be satisfied by finding a perfect mate (because he or she is not there); or a super paying job. The truth of the matter is we will always be living what seems to be unfulfilled lives - tormented by the insufficiency of everything attainable. (*Forgotten Among the Lilies* 9)

Augustine knew this human condition quite well, and at the end of his quite adventurous but frustrating quest he came to the sobering realization:

You have made us for yourself oh God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

Lent is the time to come to terms with the longing (the thirst) in our lives; to terms with the incomplete symphonies our lives are.

But that is also why during this season, we are given the story of the Samaritan Woman (John 4: 5-42). For to the extent we are able to recognize ourselves in her story, we may also see that our longing is not of a type that can be fulfilled by any particular object or person. Only by coming to the true living water – to true

worship, do our hearts come home. It is this journey to true living water that the story of the Samaritan woman nicely exemplifies, and invites us into during this season of lent.

At a Well in Samaria: The Samaritan Woman (John 4: 5-42)

The story is long but very well known, and so there is no need to retell it here. But in order to see clearly the journey that the Samaritan woman exemplifies, we need to highlight a few points about her encounter with Jesus at the well.

Firstly, one notices that the woman comes to the well at noon all by herself. This is strange. The typical time to draw water in Palestine was in the morning, before the sun comes up. And usually women went to the well in company with other women, friends and neighbors. The Samaritan woman is lonely and alone.

Secondly, one notices that in the conversation with Jesus, the Samaritan woman's understanding of who Jesus is progressively grows. At the beginning of the

conversation she relates to Jesus as a stranger and addresses her as a Jew. After Jesus had told her “if you only knew who was asking you for a drink,” she addresses her more respectfully as ‘sir. And when Jesus tells her about the five husbands she has had and the one she is living with who is not her husband, she responds, “I can see you are a prophet” () And finally she realizes that he is the Messiah: From a stranger (Jew), to Sir, to prophet, to the Messiah. We will meet a similar progression of understanding in the story of the healing of the blind man (next week). But what one must notice in this story is how the progress in understanding of who Jesus is parallels to a deepening in the conversation about water: first it is about giving Jesus water to drink; then it is about water from this well, then it is about any ordinary water before the discussion finally turns to the living water....

Thirdly, the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman leads to the exposition of the deep longing (and loneliness) at the heart of the Samaritan’s woman. When she goes to the village she invites her neighbors to “Come and see the man who has told me everything I have done.” Of course Jesus had told her

of her five husbands, but even more significantly Jesus led her to see that even though she had had five husbands, she was still longing – and the one she is living with now, Jesus tells her, is not her husband. Even with six men in her life, she was still lonely.

However, the ultimate revelation of the woman's longing and loneliness is when she and Jesus talk about the temple. Jesus as a matter of fact puts it before her: "you (and your people) worship what you do not understand." This is not simply talk about the temple, it is a revelation that shows that worship is connected with (in fact, nothing but about) the objects we seek to satisfy our longing. That is why the desperate attempt to satisfy the deep longing in our lives with one object after another is not simply a form of innocent 'experimentation'; it is an act of worship – false worship; it is idolatry. The objects and relationships are idols that will never satisfy the deep longing of her spirit. That is the full meaning of Jesus declaration: true worship: is worship God in the spirit.

That is indeed the water that Jesus gives – pointing to this fountain of true living water; leading to this

fountain, to the holy mountain where our souls and spirit can find true rest. Nothing short of that will satisfy.

Lent is the time to come to terms with the depth of our longing; a time to be honest about our loneliness; it is a time to piece the veil of that loneliness by coming to see the idols we have tried to substitute our longing for God with. It is the time to see the things we worship; the empty jars we desperately hold onto; it is the time to put down and leave behind those jars. In this respect, it is a very significant detail that in the story above, the Samaritan woman left her jar behind as she went back to the village.

But lent is also the time to come to the realization that nothing short of the Living water that God himself is will satisfy that longing. This of course might sound like very abstract theological conclusion. But coming to the Living Water takes very ordinary forms. When the Samaritans responded to the invitation of the woman and came to see Jesus at the well, they invited him into their village to stay with them. And he stayed there two days. We are not told what Jesus did those two days.

We are not told, because there was nothing to tell. It was all very ordinary. He ate the ordinary Samaritan food, took part in the usual conversation about camels, olive trees and the dry sun.

Lent invites us back to the ordinary; to the simple everyday ways of living. It is in these simple everyday activities and chores that we taste the true living water. The anecdote to our longing is not more stuff; is not to get more sophisticated. Rather the opposite. Ordinary life is enough.

Also what we see developing in this encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is friendship between unlikely strangers. He a Jew, a man; a prophet – and she, a Samaritan, a woman and a sinner. Lent is a time to discover friendship and to take time to nurture friendship. A simple dinner with friends; inviting in a stranger; an honest but loving conversation with a friend. Friends, genuine friends, allow us to begin to see the idols in our lives. But it is also the cultivation of honest friendships that keeps us from the bitterness, frustration and anger of Meribah.

Finally, it is highly instructive that at the beginning of the story, the woman comes to the well alone, living the entire village behind – a detail that might suggest that she had had enough with everyone. She had nothing more to do with them. After the conversation with this stranger- Jew-prophet-messiah, she returns to the village and invites everyone to come to the well to meet true living water.

Lent the time return to old friendships we have distanced; to family, to community; to estranged ones. We are able to do because we have met someone who has not only told us everything we have done, but allowed us to see the idols in our own lives. We have met someone who has given us permission, indeed encouraged us to lay those idols down, and to come to true worship; to the fountain of fresh living water.

*Week For: Recovering the Gift of
Sight*

Readings:
1 Samuel 16; 1-13
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

So he went and washed, and came back able to see....

The Gospel reading on the fourth Sunday of lent is the dramatic story of the restoration of the sight of the man born blind. When I think of the stories of Jesus restoring the sight of the blind in the gospels, one story that immediately comes to mind is the one of Bartimeaus (Mk 10: 46-52). What is noteworthy about that particular story is the fact that Bartimeaus begs to

be healed. What is it you want? Jesus asks Bartimaeus. “Master,” Bartimaeus responds, “that I may see again.” Even when the bystanders tell him to keep quiet, Bartimaeus cries out more insistently, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.” It is a cry that reflects both Bartimaeus’ desperation and deep longing to come to see. What a relief, therefore, it must have been for Bartimaeus to have his eyes opened.

The story of Bartimaeus confirms the usual impression: that the restoration of someone’s sight is always a good thing. The people who are blind have a terrible problem on their hand; that they desperately want to be healed of their blindness; and that once Jesus restores their sight, they live happily thereafter. We easily transfer this image to our spiritual life.

In the dramatic story of the man born blind of the fourth gospel of John, we have a different experience, which confirms that having one’s sight restored leads to a number of dramatic, undesirable consequences. Moreover, the fact that the man in today’s story did not even ask to have his eyes opened confirms that sometimes God simply forces us to see and that in itself

is a dangerous experience. I think of lent as that time when God invites us, nay brings us to sight, often reluctantly and against our own desire.

A bit of background to the story of the healing of the man born blind, might be helpful.

The story takes place in Jerusalem; during the feast of tabernacles. This was a seven day feast of harvest (Dt 16:3; Lev 23: 39-43). During the seven days of the feast, the people built and lived in tents – a reminder that the Israelites lived in booths when God brought them out of Egypt. Every morning of the feast there was a joyous procession to the Pool of Siloam, with music, headed by a priest with a golden pitcher. At the same time there was a procession to the Kidron Valley to collect willow branches which were made into a canopy over the altar of burnt offerings. As the sacrifice proceeded, the priest returning with the water entered through the Water Gate (named for this event). With a threefold trumpet blast he poured the water into a silver receptacle on the altar, which was followed by the lighting of the lamps in the temple.

That the feast of tabernacles is a feast with huge symbolism: tents, water, and light means that the story of the restoration of the sight of the blind man during the feast of tabernacles is about more than what it is. It evokes deep associations of what it means to dwell in God's household, God's tabernacle; it is about cleansing water and about light and sight.

But the feast of tabernacles was always a much anticipated period of festivity. There were lots of happy, festive crowds in Jerusalem during this harvest celebration. It was such a festive celebration, that it is the only Jewish feast with a Shimini Atzerat - a bonus day of celebration (see Lev 23: 39). Which means that the feast actually lasted 8 days!

All this is to say, that with all the wine, celebration and crowds, the feast of tabernacles provided one of the best opportunities for a beggar. For with the merry making, the chances of generosity were high. For a beggar therefore, the feast of tabernacles was simply a blast. So one can imagine, the beggar in the story, whom we are told was born blind, going back every day of the festival counting not only misery denarii coins, but

entire talents (bank notes). In other words, if this beggar's life was not the best, it was not the worst either. No wonder asking for his sight to be restored was not what was on his mind – not during the festivities. He was not as badly off as we might imagine, until one day, a man called Jesus passed by.... He and the group around him seemed to be in an intense theological discussion, which is to say a conversation about God and sin, and as they stopped by the blind beggar's side, he expected that they were going to give him something...

Instead, without even asking him, the leader of the group pulled him to the side... spat on the ground... touched his eyes with spittle and mud (yuck!!), and told him to go wash in the pool at Siloam. The man went to wash off the mud, and lo and behold he discovered that he could see.

But hold your applause. For as a result, his whole life unraveled. He found himself the center of heated discussions and angry shouts; a series of cross-examinations, which even drew in his parents, and

finally led to his being excommunicated from the temple.

This is what the period of lent is about. It is the dramatic period of having our sight restored. And just as in the case of the blind man, when this happens we find ourselves on a unfamiliar, uncomfortable and dangerous journey. In order to make this implication obvious we need to attend to at least five observations from the story of the man born blind.

1. Forced to see

In the first place, the man in the story did not ask for his eyes to be opened. Just like this blind man, it is not necessarily the case that we are begging for our sight to be restored. I do not know about you, but even as know there are areas in my life that need healing, there seems to be no urgency for that. Either the timing does not seem to be right yet, or I feel I am able to get by just fine the way things are. My life may not be the best, but it is not the worst either.

The bad (good?) news is that God will not let us just get by with being just fine. And this is the time. He is determined to force us to see, and have us live through the drama of what that means. Lent is the time when God breaks our facades of “being normal”; our having settled with simply getting by. During lent God not only intrudes on us (even without being invited) – and breaks us. That is what makes lent a dangerous season for it is a time when we meet (or are met) by a God who is tired of playing games with our life; for whom half measures will not do; who will not tolerate half-hearted attempts.

2. A Gift of creation

Secondly, restoring our sight restored is a gift – God’s gift through Christ. To see it is a gift does not mean that it is easy. Even for God it takes work, and it is messy. Listen to the details of the blind man in the story of the gospel. Jesus took the man by the hand; he spat on the ground.... touched his eyes with spittle and mud. The mud (clay) and the spittle (God’s breath) are so reminiscent of the story of creation, which is the story of lent: remember you are dust (ashes)! What this

confirms is that the miracle of the restoration of sight is nothing but God continuing his work of creation; restoring us, his creation, to its original vision.

We need to highlight that it is a gift. For we wish we could bring ourselves to see clearly through a clear process (stages) of self-improvement. That is why, I have been stressing, lent is not a time for self-improvement; it is a time to receive God's gift of touch, a time of being re-created, restored by God.

It is a gift that requires time, which is to say, it is a process; a journey. After Jesus has touched the man's eye with mud and instructs him: go and wash at Siloam...

But it is also a very personal and individual experience, which often requires being led away from the group or the crowds. In another story of healing of sight, Jesus took the man by the hand outside the village (Mark 8: 22-26), and began to work on him, until the man was able to see clear (first he saw hazily: I see men walking like trees....)

3. Coming to see who Jesus is

Thirdly, for the blind man in today's gospel, the final restoration of his sight happened at the pool at Siloam, when he washed. However, what the dramatic events that followed this event show is that what happened to the blind man is not simply the restoration of his physical sight, but a gradual journey of insight (insight) into Jesus, the true Siloam; the true source of cleansing and refreshing water.

When his neighbors question him, the man affirms that he was healed by "the man called Jesus. When the Pharisees contend that his healer could not be from God because he healed him on the Sabbath, the man asserts that his healer is a 'prophet'. When the opponents summon the man and try to make him condemn Jesus as a sinner he refuses and states that Jesus must be from God. When he finally meets Jesus again, the man accepts Jesus' self identification as the 'son of Man'

The blind man's journey in coming to see is really in coming to see who Jesus really is: first a man, then a prophet, and someone from God, and finally the Son of

Man. We also need to add how in this story the blind man's progress in spiritual sight is paralleled by the opponents' descent into spiritual blindness.

4. A journey into sight is a journey of "insight"

Fourthly, the online platform Wikipedia defines insight as the act or result of apprehending the inner nature of things or of seeing intuitively. What the story of the blind man confirms is the fact coming to see the inner nature of Jesus is itself gradual and piecemeal. If lent is the time to come to sight, it is a time to trust and be lead by insights, those penetrating, piecemeal and gratuitous flashes of revelation into the inner nature of life, of our lives, of community, and of God.

5. Worship

Finally, if coming to see is really getting an insight into who Jesus is, this is not simply a mental event; Coming to sight, is a concrete act of worship. When Jesus met the man whose eyes had been restored at the end of the story, Jesus asked him: Do you believe in the son of man. The man answered: "Who is he, sir, that I might

believe in him? Jesus said to him: you have seen him; the one speaking with you is he. He said, “I do believe Lord,” and he worshipped him.

There is no true insight that does not lead to worship, to a recognition of God and Jesus as Lord. Worship is not simply an act (songs, prayers, gestures) which we perform one or two hours a week; it is a way of living; it is a particular posture in life – a posture and an attitude of surrender; gratitude; and grateful submission.

Looked at this way, this dramatic story of the restoration of the sight of the man born blind presents us with three basic postures of living: of begging (the blind man at the start of the story); of defiance (the Pharisees and scribes); and of worship (the man whose sight had been restored). To live as a beggar is to live on the surface; satisfied with material level; it is being satisfied with the way things are; perhaps not the best, but neither the worst. The posture of begging is learning to get by just fine.

Defiance is the basic posture of those who are angry at and with God and life. The external piety and sanctimonious concern about Sabbath that the Scribes and Pharisees show in this story is simply a mask of a deep self-centeredness and anger. They are ready to throw out (excommunicate) anyone who seems to threaten their authority.

Worship is the posture of remembering clay, saliva, the breath of God- which is to say, remembering creation, and the gift it is. Worship is living into a journey of gratitude, of delight, of gentleness and of re-discovering God and oneself - the same gifts of lent we have referred to earlier.

In the end, it is clear from the story of the man born blind whose sight is restored that there are many reasons why one might want to resist this journey into worship: first there is the fear of being excommunicated; of finding oneself alone and on unfamiliar ground; of becoming odd. The more immediate reason has to do however with being satisfied with the way things are: not asking much from life. But there is also, for some people the

unwillingness to give up a life centered around me, myself and I. At the heart of all these reasons is the fear of fear of being led; the fear of insight; the fear of losing control, of surrendering to God.

Lent a time to risk being led; it is the time to risk sight (in-sight); to risk a life of surrender and gratitude. It is the time to come to true worship.

6

Week Five: Practicing Resurrection

Readings:

Ezekiel 37:12-14

Romans 8:8-11

John 11:1-45

Lazarus, come out!

If lent is a time of preparation for Easter, it is a time to practice resurrection. It is the time for the dress rehearsal of the Easter dance; a time to try the dance out, to get our moves right. Without the practice, we would not even recognize, let alone be ready for Easter. We would not know what it means to live a resurrected life.

Everyone loves resurrection just we all love a good musical performance. But as anyone who has sat in an opera house and listened to or watched the performance of one of Mozart's or Vivaldi's symphonies knows, such a performance does not simply happen. It takes many hours, many painstaking hours of practice, playing the same tune over and over again, until finally one is able to feel confident to play it before a live audience.

Easter is when we go public with our proclamation of the resurrection. That is when we invite everyone to look at us as witnesses of the resurrection. To get that act right, and to be able to play it consistently, we need a lot of practice. That is why, as we get close to Easter, on the fifth Sunday of lent we reflect on the story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11: 1-45). This story provides us with a good map of how practicing resurrection looks like. We know the story very well, but it is important to spend some time rehearsing at least four crucial details.

1. Lazarus died

First, the fact that Lazarus died. And even more significantly that Jesus allowed Lazarus to die. The story begins with Jesus receiving a text message from Bethany. It was a short but clear message sent from the sisters Martha and Mary. “Master the one you love is ill.” One would imagine that that on receiving this message, Jesus would have rushed to Bethany, to Lazarus’ bedside; to try to save his life, or at least tend to him. But that is not what happens. We are told that after receiving the news that his friend Lazarus was sick, he stayed for an extra two days! And when he received the news that Lazarus had eventually died, Jesus observed that he was glad that happened. This is strange. Jesus could have saved Lazarus, but he not only allowed him to die, he says: “it is good that Lazarus died.. For then, he will rise again.”

This is a crucial observation that speaks deeply to our longing for new life. We love, wish for and eager for resurrection. But we are often not ready or prepared to die. We secretly hope for a resurrection that is just a continuation of our current lives – only made more made more glorious. The reason for this is obvious. Death is painful. Death is total loss, it is separation; it

involves burial. So we hang on life; we hang onto even those areas of our lives, which are for all practical purposes all but dead. In many ways we practice the ancient Egyptian art of embalming the dead. Mummies- we call them – those embalmed bodies; dead bodies, but who are still preserved, and who, at least on the outside, may appear to look as alive as they once were. There are many areas in our lives, relationships and promises that we simply hang on as mummified shadows of the gifts they once were. Even though there is not much life left into them, we either feel it is important to preserve them, or are simply afraid to let them die. It may be okay to keep them as trophies, but without letting them die, there can be no resurrection. “it is good that Lazarus died, for then he can rise again.”

Practicing resurrection involves and requires practice dying or at least to allow death to happen. Sally, the mother of my friend Irene had been sick and homebound for over four years. During the time of her sickness, the family ruptured. Some of the siblings, realizing that there was not much for them in her will, wanted to take her to very expensive nursing home,

even though it did not provide the best care. They just wanted all her resources would be all used up by the time she died. In this way, there would be not much left for the other siblings. As Sally got sicker and weaker, the siblings fought bitterly of how best to take care of her. Sally was 94, sick and very weak, but she hang onto life. Until one afternoon, Irene sat by her bedside rubbed her hands, stroked her hair, kissed her and whispered to her: “mother, it is okay to die.” Sally closed her eyes and peacefully died.

It is as if Sally needed permission to die. It is she needed to hear from her eldest daughter that it was okay to die. I find Sally’s story very instructive, for we too need permission to die, or at least to let those dead areas of our life to die; to put them aside, to surrender them; to let them go. That is what in a way Jesus does for Lazarus – by staying away for two days. He gave Lazarus room, permission to die. That is what the time of lent is about. It is a time to let die not only the areas of our life we hate, but to let even some things we love in our lives die. Jesus loved Lazarus, but let him die. This is hard; this is painful. Through the practice of self-denial, renunciation, fasting, waiting, we practice

dying. What encourages us to do so is the Good News: “unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it cannot bear fruit (v..). For, while not all death leads to resurrection, resurrection requires death.

2. Grief: tears of pain and loss

Secondly to say that there is no resurrection without death is not to pretend that death is not painful. When finally Jesus arrived at Bethany, the sisters (first Martha, then Mary) came out to meet him crying – mourning the loss of the dear brother. Master, they said: “if you had been here, he would not have died.” If lent is a time to practice resurrection, it is a time to mourn what we have lost. Lent is not the time to be stoic; it is a time to be soft. It is a time for tears- looking back, to grieve our shattered dreams and broken promises; to mourn our lost innocence. It is the time to be sentimental. Resurrection is not a panacea that glosses over pain: after all, all will be well!. Resurrection is a gift that only happens amidst tears. Tears are indeed a gift that nurtures and massages us into softness, they draw us closer to the heart of God.

When Jesus saw the tears of Martha and Mary, he was moved and he too wept. And they said: “See how much he loved him.”

Many of us grew up with an image of a stern, aloof and just God, who keeps scores of all our actions. Lent is the time to discover, or rediscover the tender side of God; a God who cries and weeps over our shattered dreams and over our lost loves. Lent is the time for our grieving selves to embrace a tearful and tear-filled God. If not all tears lead to resurrection, it is still true: no tears, no resurrection.

3. Do not even go there...

Thirdly, when Jesus arrived at the tomb, he told them to roll back the stone. Martha, the dead man’s sister said: Lord, by now there will be a stench. He has been dead for four days...

If there are areas in our lives that we do not want to die, there are a number of other areas that we have easily given up on. Some of these areas have been very painful that just thinking about them, let alone talk

about them, evokes deep pain. We so desperately try to forget them or at least pretend that we have forgotten them. The Americans have a good expression when someone introduces a topic that is so personal and painful that they would rather not talk about they warn the other person: “Do not even go there”

Lent is the time to revisit some of those “do not even go there” gravesites of our lives.

This is actually the story of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel, which is the first reading on the fifth Sunday of lent. In this story of Ezekiel chapter 37, the spirit of God leads the prophet to a valley of dry bones, and asks him: Can these bones live? The prophet answers, “I do not know” – because they look pretty dead to me.” The spirit then orders the prophet to prophesy over the dry bones, and as he did, they began to take on flesh. He did it three times, and the bones became fully alive. And then God declared:

That is how I intend to deal with the House of Israel.

They have been saying: our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are cut off (v.11)

Thus says the Lord: Oh my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them (v.12ff).

The fact that Jesus was able to walk to the grave of Lazarus in spite of the warning of the stench simply confirms that no areas of our lives are so dead or so smelly that God will not be able to walk into and offer the gift of resurrection.

4. A gift that takes God and community

The fourth observation is about what happens when Jesus arrives at the grave of Lazarus. He raised his eyes to God and prayed.

And when he had said this he cried out: Lazarus come out...

What this confirms is that Resurrection is always God's gift. Even Jesus could not raise himself from the dead. Rather it is God who raised him from the dead. Similarly for Lazarus, it is by God's power that Jesus is able to command Lazarus to come out. It is God who commands us into resurrection.

To acknowledge this is to recognize that resurrection always breaks through as ‘unexpected’, as something new and as a gift (we cannot work ourselves into a life of resurrection). It therefore calls for ongoing openness to the Spirit of God; and involves a certain ‘waiting’; and an ability to respond to God’s grace and command.

It also requires community. When the dead man came out, with his face still wrapped and his hands and feet still bound in burial bands, Jesus said to those around him: “untie him and let him go.” The African proverb it takes a village to raise a child is true in this case. Living into the full freedom and new life of resurrection requires a community. It is this community that both unleashes and affirms the gift of resurrection.

If lent is a time to practice resurrection, then it is the time to rediscover not only God, but also the church as community of those who accompany and stand with Jesus at the gravesite of those bound by marginalizing social structures and suffocating systems. It is the time to rediscover and renew the church as a community whose call is to release those bound by the bound by the power of sin and death. As a community of the

resurrected, the church carries out this command to 'unbind' first and foremost through the gift of forgiveness – which is the very first gift of the Risen Lord: “Receive the power of the spirit, whose sins you forgive they are forgiven, whose sins you retain they are retained (Jn: 20-23) – Or, as Matthew puts it: “whatever you bind on earth shall be considered so in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven (Mt 18:18)

But the church also carries out the command to unbind through many forms of service and ministry especially to the weak and the poor, and as it fights to roll back the stones of unfair structures and systems that imprison many to forms of living that are worse than death.

Finally, even though, when all is said and done, resurrection remains a gift, it requires and takes small moves every day in order to anticipate and practice the unexpected gift that resurrection always is. That is why I find the poem by Wendell Berry entitled *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front* an appropriate way to end this reflection. In the end, this is what lent is about. Wendell Berry writes:

So friends, every day do something that won't
computer.

Love the Lord.

Love the world.

Work for nothing.

Take all you have and be poor

Love someone who does not deserve it...

Ask the questions that have no answers

Invest in the millennium.

Plant sequoias

Expect the end of the world.

Laugh.

Laughter is immeasurable.

Be joyful though you have considered all the facts...

Practice resurrection.

Conclusion:
The Life of the Beloved

After I had worked on the reflections, but before I travelled to Kuching to give them, I received a note from Jeff to say that the Lenten sessions had been reduced to three evenings of 30 minutes each. As I thought of ways to summarize the reflections, I chanced to watch a recording of the late Fr. Henri Nouwen's talk at the Crystal Cathedral (California) about the life of the beloved. I was not only impressed by what Nouwen had to say, I found that much of his reflection confirmed and extended on some of the ideas that I had been working on in the reflections. I was particularly impressed by what Fr. Nouwen had to say about the Eucharist as the model of the life of the Beloved. Each one of us, Nouwen says is God's beloved. The same

words that God spoke to Jesus at the Jordan are spoken to each one of us: “You are my beloved. On you my favor rests!” Since this is the case, Nouwen notes the invitation and mark of Christian life is for us to live as truly God’s beloved in the world. In order to do so, we need to look carefully at the Jesus and his life as God’s beloved son.

In Jesus’ life, we discover this pattern namely that as God’s beloved, Jesus was taken (chosen), blest, broken and given to the world. Moreover, it is through this same pattern that the disciples recognized Jesus after his resurrection: when he took the bread, blest it, broke it and gave it to them. This is the way of the beloved, the way of Jesus, and the way of the beloved community. For, as we are told, on the night before he died, when Jesus is gathered with his close friends, he took the bread, gave thanks, broke the bread and gave it to them saying...”Take, Eat, Take Drink”. But he also ordered them to do likewise ‘in my memory’. And so as God’s beloved, we continue to gather, take the bread, bless it, break it and give it. This is what makes the Eucharist more than simply an event, but the very metaphor, the pattern of our lives as God’s beloved. To

live as God's beloved is to live a life that is taken, blest, broken, given.

Without trying to force the five weeks of lent into this Eucharistic pattern, I began to see how the themes of being TAKEN; BLEST; BROKEN and GIVEN provide another handle on the season of lent. Since lent is the time to time to deepen what it means to be God's beloved, it is an invitation to remember that we are taken, blest, broken and given – by God. And that is the Good News of our lives. Accordingly, I decided to rehearse and use these four themes for the actual talks in Kuching.

Since it became obvious how these Eucharistic themes in many ways confirm and make concrete the reflections in this book, I thought that by way of conclusion I would briefly make explicit some of the connections that confirm a Eucharistic life and practice is the most concrete way that the Lenten journey is lived and deepened.

Taken:

When Jesus came to the Jordan to be baptized by John, a voice from the clouds announced: “This is my beloved son; on him my favor rests.”(Mt 3:17). In this very incident Jesus is not only named for who he is (“beloved”), he is claimed by God – “My” - he belongs to God. The story of Jesus is our story as at our own baptisms, God announces to the world who we are (beloved), but in the same incident claims us: you are mine, you belong to me. As we live in the world, we often find ourselves facing an identity crisis which might take many forms. The first form of our identity crisis is often connected to the realization that we often find ourselves living within many stories and identities. We are someone’s son or daughter; husband or wife; we are citizens of a particular nation; and a member of a particular race or tribe; as a member of this or the other club. Each of these stories tries to claim us, and some of them want us to be totally committed to them and only to them, but we feel that that is not our true identity. But then we are not very sure who we really are. Who is the real me?

Somehow connected to this sense of confusion is a sense of invisibility that we often feel as we find ourselves a mere number, a mere statistic within some

of the stories that claim us. Do we even matter, we wonder? Does anyone even notice us? Are we significant and unique – or just another face?

It is usually out of this feeling of being a no-body that we desperately search for meaning and significance. We feel, and society seems to encourage this feeling that the only way we can become somebody is if we work hard at it, get a lot of money, become successful, powerful and influential. Then and only then, so we feel, can we become somebody and be noticed. That is why the fact that we are claimed by God: “you are my beloved” is such welcome and refreshing news. For we do not even have to earn being God’s beloved. That is simply who we are. It comes as a pure gift. It is this story, this gift of who we are – chosen by God, claimed by God, already taken by God... that we remember during lent.

This is not only the gift of baptism; it is the gift of creation. For in the story of creation, God *takes* the clay (ashes), and out of the clay God fashioned man and woman. This is the story of lent. “Remember you are dust...”. But as we noted, what we remember is not the

bad news (unto dust you shall return), but the uniqueness, gift – and God’s own breath which we share. When I think of creation, I imagine God as a potter, taking the clay, as the prophet says, and fashioning one human being at a time. Even for God, I would like to imagine it takes time and many attempts. And when God finally gets what he likes, he breathes in the clay, and takes his divine insignia and brands the product: “made in heaven” – or even better, ‘proudly made in heaven.’ Then, and only then, are we born. To be sure, within this story, even the fact that one day we will return to dust, to become part of that eternal creating gift of God, itself becomes good news. The good news is that even in death, we will not be abandoned by God. Even then, we are his; we still belong to him- as dust in his hands.

In a world where we are never sure who we are, or to whom we belong; in a world where we desperately try to become somebody, it is the practice of Sabbath that allows us to ‘remember’ who we are, and thus rest in the grateful knowledge that we are already claimed. We already have a story; we belong to God. Without

Sabbath, we live frantic lives in a desperate search for beauty, success, meaning, and power.

Blessed:

The word blessing comes from two Latin words: *bene* (good) and *dictus* (say), which means to say good things. God said good things (blest) about Jesus: “my beloved son; my favor rests on him.” To put it in our everyday language, God is simply saying of Jesus: I am proud of him. I am happy to call him my son. God says the same good things about us! This truth is as simple as it is difficult for many of us to imagine. The idea of a God who judges his people, who corrects them, warns them and rewards them for being good is for many of us is not difficult to imagine. But the idea of a God smiling down on us is more difficult to get used to. The Lord takes delight in his people, the psalmist tells us. The Lord takes delight in us, in each one of us. In order to get our minds around this fact, we need to remember (again) the story of creation. At every stage (day) of creation, when God looked back at what he had made he was pleased: “and God saw it was good.”. And when he had created human beings in his image, “God saw it was very good.” And this was not the result of what

creation had done to deserve. That goodness, beauty, and pride on part of God is all pure gift.

Moreover, God does not stop there, scripture says that then God ‘blest them saying, be fruitful, multiply...’ There is something that communicated abundance in this story. God created us in his image. He saw it was very good. Then (as if that was not enough), he blest us more still... But also notice what God is saying: be fruitful! Thus, not only who we are, but also the fruits we are to bear are not really the result of our designs and hard work (they do not happen because we deserve them); they are nothing but gifts of God’s super abundance and gratuity. That is why the fact that God blesses calls us back into a life of gratitude and thanksgiving. That is why I find the words the priest uses in blessing the bread and wine during the Eucharistic celebration so important: “Blessed are you God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, fruit of the earth and work of human hands..” In the same way, in taking the wine: “Blessed are you Lord God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this wine to offer...”

What the priest is doing is really return thanks, or return blessing – to God. It is God's blessing, God's abundance that has given us the fruits, for which we are grateful. The gifts of bread and wine during the Eucharistic celebration are a symbol, the very sign of our lives.

But the fact of being blest by God also calls us into the practice of receiving and giving blessing (saying good things) about others. Whenever I am leaving home to travel, I ask my mother and all others at home to give me a blessing. I kneel down in my mother's living room and mother and the others lay their hands on me and say a prayer. My young nieces and nephews love this, because then they get a chance to touch (and for some to play with) my hair. I love the practice because as they lay their hands on me I get a confirmation from them: we love you, we trust you, we send you off with a full spirit; you are not alone. This, helps to take away any feeling of moral loneliness I might feel as I leave home.

It is also through the practice of blessing that we are able to recover a sense of joy and laughter as we are

able to lay aside the angst about proving ourselves or the constant need for perfection. Remembering that God blesses us is what allows us to receive the goodness not only in ourselves, but also in the world and in others. By accepting to be blessed by God, we in turn are able to see and affirm: God is good; life is good; creation is good; you my friend, are good. And lent gets us back into this story of God blessing us and calling us his 'beloved'.

Broken:

This is perhaps the most difficult gift to understand about God namely that God breaks his beloved; that he allows him to suffer and die. And that this is part of the Good News. To be sure, we are all broken people. We live lives that are far from complete. Pain, suffering and death accompany us at every stage of our way. Some of the brokenness in the world is open and out there and so can very easily be named: war, terrorism, sickness, physical pain... Other forms of brokenness are more hidden and may be more difficult to see, whether it is our broken dreams, and frustrated hopes, or shattered relationships and inner fears and past betrayals. In the midst of these and many other forms of pain and

suffering we experience loneliness and desolation not only from friends, but also from God. The experience of being broken speaks about God's apparent absence in the midst of our pain and anguish: "My God, My God why have you abandoned me."

But the experience of being broken is about coming to terms with the many forms of brokenness in our lives – and to acknowledge how deeply broken, how sad, how lonely and how "abandoned" we feel. And lent is a good time to name our brokenness, not in a narcissistic kind of way, but as a way to accept the truth of our lives. But also as a way of acknowledging how estranged and 'far away from home' – from the loving embrace of God – we are. That is why as Henri Nouwen depicts, the story of the prodigal son, captures well this anguish of being away from home. Moreover, in this story, it is not only the young son, but the elder son as well who is estranged from the Father's loving embrace. The young son's brokenness is more obvious. He is rebellious; he travels far away from home; he suffers from loneliness and destitution; he is miserable after squandering the father's blessings. It is not often difficult to recognize our own story in the story of the

young son. But the elder son's experience might speak even more closely to what many of us feel. For he is a 'good' son; he has never rebelled; he has fulfilled all the father's wishes and commands; he had never left home; but he is not happy. Instead he is sad and resentful. Although he has never travelled away from home, he does not wish to enter into the father's home – and the father's loving embrace! I think for many of us it is this brokenness of being 'good Christians'; good Catholics; but never fully feeling at home with and within God's loving embrace that so painfully haunts us.

And perhaps we have found ways to protect ourselves from this pain; ways to hide the deep resentment and bitterness that gnaws at the depth of our inner being. We behave and put on an external air of being fine – 'just fine'. That is why being broken by God really speaks to the experience of dying or letting die some aspects of our lives. This is the story of Lazarus – of Jesus allowing Lazarus his friend to die. For then he will rise again. In the same way God breaks us or allows us to be broken, for then (and only then) can we experience resurrection. But lent is also the time to

come to come to tears as we are broken, or as we mourn our losses. Through the gift of tears God softens us, and brings us into his loving embrace, as God's own tears and our tears become part of God's gift of the resurrection, which is nothing but God's act of creating a gentler, more humane new creation. In other words, our being broken through suffering, pain and loss is the holy grail of God's embrace. Through and by this embrace God kneads us into his new creation so that just like the bread that becomes Eucharist, we can be given to the world as God's beloved.

Given

The essence and inner life of God is gift. It is out of this essence and abundance that God creates the universe. It is this abundance and essence that he passes on to us his creation: "Let us make humans in our own image." And so in his image God created us – male and female. The scriptures bear witness to the same scandalous abundance of God's presence and gift to our fore fathers: searching out for Adam and Eve as they sinned and tried to hide away from him; in calling Abram; in his attempt to save his people from slavery: "I have

heard the cry of my people”; in his making a covenant with Israel; in his invitation to the people (through the prophets) to ‘come back to me’; in his promise: I will not abandon you. I have called you by name... the New Testament marks a new stage in this story when “in the fullness of time God sent (gave) his son to the world. Jesus’ own life is nothing but an extension and expression of this abundance generosity of God’s life and presence to us. He Jesus is nothing but a witness to God’s essence as gift. And so, at the Last Supper he took the bread, blest it, broke it and gave it to his disciples: ‘Take this is my body, given for you.’ And the same with the wine: “Take, this is my blood given for you.” That sums up Jesus life pretty well. But that also sums up pretty well our life as his followers whom he invites to live in the same way “in memory of me.”

The end, the purpose, if we can speak of this in terms of purpose, the vision for which we are God’s beloved is to be given to the world. That we are God’s beloved is not simply for and about us; there is a higher purpose to this. It is to be drawn up into God’s life, and God’s essence as gift, which is to say, it is to be given to the world. Just as in the case of Abram’s call. Abram

is blessed by God, so that ‘all the ends of the earth may find blessing in you.’”

Does this then mean that God simply uses us? No. he simply invites us to live into our true identity. That is what it means to belong to God. Moreover, being given to the world is not simply a duty; a sacrifice: it is the very beauty of God’s life as a gift.

One of my favorite stories in the gospels is the feeding of the multitude, which all the four gospels tell. It is a well known story when Jesus is preaching in a deserted place and the hour is getting late, and everyone is hungry. The disciples ask Jesus to send the crowds away to the town so that they can buy food. But Jesus refuses to do and asks the disciples to provide food to the crowds. They cannot believe that Jesus would even make such a suggestion. We ourselves do not have enough, they tell him. We only have five loaves and two fish here., which is not enough not even for us, let alone to the crowd of over five thousand people. As the story goes, Jesus asks them to bring the five loaves and two fish to him, and orders everyone to sit on the grass. He takes the loaves and fish, says the blessing; and

gives it out to them. And lo everyone had enough. Notice the pattern again: he *takes* the fish and loaves, *blesses* it, *breaks* it and *gives* it.

That it strikes me is the call of the beloved. To heal the world of scarcity – of the feeling that we do not have enough. It is because of that feeling that we hoard and live selfish lives and we are never satisfied even as we amass the world's resources. The healing of that scarcity happens through a life of gift, of generosity, offering what we have (five loaves and two fish), which become part of God's gift of abundance: everyone had their fill.

But also notice that Jesus commands them: pick up the fragments so that nothing goes to waste. And they gathered twelve baskets of fragments (John 6:11). It is through gift that scarcity turns not simply abundance, but over abundance. I like the image of gathering fragments. For it strikes me that this is what a life of resurrection is about. It is the gathering the fragments of our life, of our death, our brokenness and turning that into unexpected new life. It is this surprise, this unexpected breaking forth from our graves of scarcity, fear, death that Easter is about.

It is God who Eastered in us as it were, who bursts forth in us and through us his new life, which neither fear nor death can contain any more, but is able to shine forth for the world to see. To say that we are witnesses to Christ's resurrection is to say that in and through our lives others can catch a glimpse – fragments – of God's gifts to the world. It is to make the scandalous claim that we are, so to say, the first fruits of God's gift of new creation which is made manifest in the resurrection of his beloved son. As first born from the dead, Christ is the first installment of God's promise. But then there is also all of us who God has claimed as his beloved, and therefore invites us to live the same life of the beloved: chosen, blest, broken and given to the world. What a humbling but joyful call that God has extended to us to be his Easter people. A happy Easter to you all.