

Reading: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Today begins the season of the Church's year called Lent. It's a season when we re-examine our priorities. The majority of Christians do it and we follow the example of Jesus who spent 40 days in the wilderness. During that time Jesus was tempted to lose his focus. Famously, the Devil tempted Jesus to bow down and worship him. Jesus responded, quoting from the Ten Commandments. Today's passage offers us the Threefold Way of Lent which is prayer and fasting and acts of charity. Being a follower of God does not make us immune from temptation. It is easy for us to forget that we live in a world of powers and principalities and we also can find ourselves driven away from our focus. (Although when it does happen, we find it hard to recognise in our own lives.)

Sport can become a god that takes the place of God. Lance Armstrong has demonstrated to the world how, when the goal becomes winning at all cost, everything else falls victim. By his own admission truth, friendship, conscious, integrity and reputation have all fallen victim to the ultimate god of winning. Our society holds up our sports people as role models and we shouldn't be surprised when they fall short. A friend of mine, a Christian, became a very good runner. She caught herself looking at the insoles of the other runners shoes in the changing room to see how they wore them with the goal of discovering what their weakness was in order to beat them. She still runs, but now she does it for pleasure, not to win at all cost. Sport, a very good thing, can take the place of God, a better thing, in our lives.

We need to protect, support and help each other stay close to the heart of God. Those with faith are a minority in our world, a world that wants us to believe God is just a word, prayer is just a fantasy, holiness is a dream and eternal life is just wishful thinking - a world where the secondary is served up as the main course.

Early Jewish hearers of the gospel narrative would have connected the forty days of Jesus' retreat with the forty days that Elijah wandered hungry in the wilderness, the forty days and nights that Moses fasted before etching the Ten Commandments, and the forty years that the former Egyptian slaves wandered in the desert before reaching the Promised Land.

And it is a tradition in Christianity that Jesus lay dead in his tomb for forty hours before he was resurrected on Easter Day.

But we do not see the glorified Jesus in our Gospel reading. Rather Matthew 6 calls us to take up the threefold focus of Lent: fasting, prayer and giving. And these things are only any good if they serve to draw us closer to the heart of God.

By staying close to the heart of God, Jesus is able to endure his time of testing. What testing, what time of trial do you face in your life? Often it's one of motivation. We can do the right things for the wrong reason. Lent calls us back to a time and a place free of distraction, a desert time where we can set our hearts on God again.

Family, advancement in our careers, paying the mortgage, our health, our garden all of these are great and good things, but they aren't God. Only God is God. We can see the shortfall in Lance Armstrong's life; can we see it in our own?

Lent calls us *forgetters* to become *rememberers*.

You may remember the story of Helen of Troy. According to legend this beautiful queen was captured and carried away and became a victim of amnesia. She became a prostitute and not remembering her name or her royal blood wandered from street to street.

Back in her home land an old friend never gave up hope that she was still alive. Determined to find her, he went to new lands and searched high and low. One day he saw a tattered woman with deep lines across her face. There was something about her that seemed familiar so he went up to her, "What is your name?" he asked. What she said made no sense so he asked to see her hands. She held them out. Then the old friend knew this was Helen. "You are Helen." he said, "You are Helen." She looked up astonished. The fog began to clear. "I am Helen." She discovered her lost self. Putting her arms around her friend she went. And he carried her home where she became the queen she was born to be.

We too are wandering in land that is not our own. We have forgotten who we are until one day an old friend comes and shows us His hands. They are pierced hands. It is then he utters the name we have long forgotten – 'child of God'. Then we remember, "I am a child of God, created in the image and likeness of God. I am of a royal priesthood. I have been chosen and named and called." And the wounded one carries us home rejoicing.

Jesus put aside 40 days to reflect on God. We do too, in Lent, so that God becomes again the ultimate focus for our lives. When God becomes the focus of our lives, then everything else takes its rightful place.

- Nick Mountfort