

Reading: Matthew 6:1-6,16-21; Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Between the years 1854 and 1929 over 200,000 orphans and abandoned children in cities in the east of the United States were put on trains in search of families. Many of the children had lost their parents in epidemics, some were from poor immigrants, some from parents too poor to support their children, some orphaned from the civil war and some had parents whose alcohol issues made them incapable of looking after their own children.

But they all needed love. Loaded onto trains in groups of 40 they stopped along the way. They were lined up on the platform like livestock while potential parents asked them questions, checked their health and even examined their teeth. If they were rejected they got back on the train for the next stop.

Lee Nailling was one such orphan. He was just eight when he was loaded on the orphan train and he was one very anxious young boy. What was to become of him? More of him later.

Jesus in our Gospel for Ash Wednesday is urging us not to take on our Lenten disciplines of giving, praying and fasting just to look good. In fact he uses a very strong word. He says, "Don't be like the hypocrites." Hypocrite was the Greek word used for stage actors - a person whose real self was concealed while they pretended to be someone else.

Lent is a journey to discover our real selves. We journey with Jesus in the desert. In the desert Jesus has his status as the son of God and Messiah confirmed. In his time of testing he is reassured of the love that the Father has for him.

For us Lent is time to have our status as the children of God reaffirmed. We need to know again, deep in our hearts that God loves us, cares for us, and is concerned for us. We need to know that we are no longer orphans but children of God.

Lent began in the early church. Easter was the time for baptisms and those preparing for baptism would pray fast and undertake acts of mercy. So helpful was this time of preparation that pretty soon the whole church was doing it.

But why expect people to do spiritual disciplines? Surely having high expectations of one another will just drive people away especially young people.

Last year 25 young people joined a project called Vocation. They vowed to pray every day, to bless a neighbour every week, to go to spiritual direction monthly, and to have a 24 hour sabbath rest each week. They also gave money to the church, gathered for meals and regularly prayed together. This was a group of 18 to 30 year olds. At the completion of the year Michelle said this, "This year has been exactly what I was needing. Coming back again and again to the simple elements and rhythms of faith and pushing into the discomfort I had avoided before now has changed how I want to continue in my faith. Put simply, I have grown to new depths and new joy." The motto of those in the Vocation project is simple: pray, bless, notice, rest.

Rather than 25 young people doing it this year 50 have enrolled.

Remember Lee Nailling - well things got worse before they got better. He was split from his brother but finally a tall skinny man and a tiny plump woman took him in. The next morning they sat down to eat breakfast. As he reached out to eat the plump woman stopped him. "Not until we have said grace." She spoke softly about a Father who was in heaven. Lee had no father so he liked the idea of a Father in heaven but he still wanted to run away. Then she said the words he needed to hear. She thanked God for the privilege of

having a child of her own. For the first time since he had boarded that train Lee began to relax, “These are people that actually want me,” he said to himself.

After breakfast they took him for haircut and to each of houses in the town - all six of them. “This is our new son,” they said to everyone in town. This was the way it turned out. He never did run away but went on to discover in this little family all the love and care he could ever wish for.

The journey that Lee made, we all make this Lent. It is a journey to discover that we are the children of God. We are loved and cared for not because we can fast or give all our money to the poor or pray early in the morning. We are loved and cared for because God wants us. Nothing more, nothing more complicated. All our efforts might help us, but we don't need to win God's affection. Our adoption is irreversible and our God delights in us. We are no longer on a train to nowhere. We have come home. As our reading in Joel tells us, we come to our God who is totally gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.