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A time to be 'desert people'

Nothing worthwhile comes easily, writes Monica Dutton. If we are not tested, we never know our potential. It is the sacrifice that gives us strength, the struggle that makes us resilient.

BY Monica Dutton*

We always knew when Lent started. It was when the Freddos disappeared.

For as long as we could remember, dad had always arrived home on Friday night with a brown paper bag containing six chocolate Freddo Frogs (one for each of us), and a Cadbury Dairy Milk for mum. It didn't matter whether we had been 'naughty or nice' there was always a Freddo for everyone. When he came through the door without them, we knew Lent had started.

If the significance of Ash Wednesday was not immediately apparent to us, the lack of chocolate frogs on Friday nights certainly was!

As we grew older, Lent was defined by Project Compassion boxes, Stations of the Cross and purple cloths draped over statues in the church. It was 'a solemn time of prayer, fasting and almsgiving' (echoes of the Green Catechism?) I remember feeling very virtuous in Year 2 as we coloured one of 40 golden pennies on a worksheet during 'quiet time' after lunch to signify completion of a range of options for Lenten observance (picking up papers in the playground was deemed by Sister Fabian to be a particularly worthy endeavour!).

And of course – there was the mandatory fish and chips on Friday night. The little corner shop would be jam packed and overflowing onto the street with Catholics from near and far, and the noise and clamour of orders being shouted to the sweaty cooks. The heat, the smells, the smoky haze, the fish being dipped into creamy white batter in shiny stainless steel bowls, and the steaming sizzle as they hit the boiling oil. And "Number 56!" being shouted over the top of the animated chatter and red laminex tables as the salt container was deftly shaken and the order of fish, chips and potato scallops for eight was quickly and efficiently wrapped in newspaper to keep it hot until we got back home.

Lent and its peculiar observances were all very simple really.

As time passed, so did the externally imposed disciplines. The focus of Lent shifted. Personal change was now required. This made things very much more complicated!

They had moved the goalposts! It was now fine to have Freddos during Lent and barbecues on Friday nights. We now had to decide for ourselves. What to do? Surely it wouldn't be too hard to think of something to 'give up' for Lent – after all we had been doing it for years! It became increasingly apparent however, that it wasn't enough to just 'give up' something any more. There needed to be a change of heart, of mind and of spirit. This was very confronting indeed! So much easier to go without Freddos, or later – to let that bottle of Shiraz age nicely under the stairs for a few more weeks. The challenge of self-directed personal renewal was much more difficult.

Making time to reflect on our lives and taking steps to move out of our comfort zone is not easy. We have become far too comfortable; we have come to think that everything should be achieved with minimal effort – that inconvenient, difficult or unpleasant aspects of life are to be avoided at all cost. We are constantly bombarded by advertising which shows us perfect people living perfect lives in perfect houses. We sanitise, sterilise and euthanise. Social networking allows us to have 24-7 'friends' without ever leaving the house. There is a growing sense of entitlement – we deserve, we demand, we dispute.

AND... we sell ourselves short.

We seem to have forgotten that growth and change are the result of hard work, self-discipline and struggle. We don't ask the winning athlete if the training, endurance and early mornings were hard – we ask if they were worth it. The new mother doesn't dwell on the difficult labour – she delights in the miracle of her beautiful baby.

There is the story of the world famous concert pianist who walked exhausted to the wings amidst thunderous applause after his third encore. As he was mobbed by fans at the stage door after the performance, one of them said to him, "I would give my life to be able to play like that!" His simple reply... "I have".

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Another story tells of a young boy who watched, mesmerised, as a number of baby chicks began to hatch in their nest. Three or four of them fought their way through the shell and emerged, tentatively into the big, wide world. One of them was slower, and weaker, and took much longer than the others to peck away from inside the shell. The boy felt sorry for it and decided to help. He cracked the shell. As he gently lifted the chick, he realised its wings were malformed. It would never be able to fly. The fight to leave the shell strengthens the wings ready for life on the outside world. In his efforts to assist the weaker one, he had deprived it of the opportunity to gain strength through the struggle.

So often, we deny ourselves this opportunity. We take the shortcut, the easy path, the hassle-free option. We are too busy, too tired, too stressed. It's all too hard. As Lent approaches for another year it is a reminder to us that sometimes we need to consider other options – "that our way of acting should be different from the world's way" (Rule of Benedict, 4).

A few years ago, I received a stark reminder that Lent had begun. I arrived at the church and absent-mindedly dipped my fingers into the font as always – to find I was touching sand. The sudden realisation was such a powerful, tangible connection to the desert. Desert experiences are good for the soul. The silence, the vastness, the rawness, the solitude, the struggle... and the realisation of oneness with Creator and Spirit.

While the ancients were acutely aware of the discipline of self-denial in the physical sense, the twenty-first century has desensitised us to its benefits. There is no question we lead lives of excess – too often, too many, too much. The New Year media hype revolves around fad diets, detox regimes and exercise machines. The secular world understands these excesses and builds multi-billion dollar empires to service our need for restraint.

Periods of fasting and self-denial are common to all the major traditions. The sense of a physical undertaking being a reminder of the spiritual journey which connects mind, body and spirit as we turn again towards new life. Desert times are hard. They test us, and they give us strength. They are a reminder of a deeper call from within that enables a change of heart. The essence of the Lenten season is not just to follow Jesus into the desert, but to take up the challenge to *be 'desert people' ourselves* – in our own place and time.

This week, as we consider how we might respond to the invitation of the Gospel during Lent in 2012, I am reminded of simpler times. Right now though, I would give anything for a chocolate Freddo from my dad!

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Source: <http://www.goodsams.org.au/good-oil/a-time-to-be-%E2%80%98desert-people%E2%80%99/>