

# Talking Cents

March 2017

*Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by Mary Betz, Catholic spiritual director and writer on ecology, justice, scripture and spirituality.*

## Lenten conversion through fasting, prayer and giving: A fresh take on the tradition

*Repent, for the reign of God is at hand* is one of first messages of Jesus in the gospels of Mark and Matthew. Lent has long been a time for Christians to focus on repentance, through fasting, prayer and giving alms. Throughout the centuries, repentance has been associated with individual sinfulness and sackcloth and ashes, although in living memory, more often with giving up alcohol, films, lollies or chocolate.

But repentance may call for something more challenging than giving up favourite foods. The Greek *metanoia* means a change of heart, transformation, conversion, or turning (toward God and God's reign). In his 2017 Lenten message, Pope Francis says: *This season urgently calls us to conversion. Christians are asked to return to God "with all their hearts"* (Joel 2:12): <http://www.caritas.org.nz/system/files/Pope%27s%20Lenten%20Message%202017.pdf>

So, what might the traditional three Lenten ways of repentance, or coming closer to our God of love, look like in the twenty-first century?

### Fasting

Isaiah (58:6) gives us God's word on fasting:

*Is this not the fast that I choose:*

*to loose the bonds of injustice,*

*to undo the thongs of the yoke,*

*to let the oppressed go free,*

*and to break every yoke?*

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,*

*and bring the homeless poor into your house;*

*when you see the naked, to cover them,*

*and not to hide?*

It is true that we have Jesus as a model of fasting from food in the desert for forty days after his baptism. But we also have Jesus' example of a public life spent practising the other kinds of

fasting that God desires: feeding the hungry, healing, spending time with those who were outcasts in his society, teaching about wealth and poverty, and protesting the unjust economic structures represented by temple system of his time.

Today we see much suffering and injustice in our own country: the broken economic system in our country which leaves tens of thousands homeless or inadequately housed; the increase in numbers of those begging on the streets of Auckland; the recent controversy over the deportation of Indian students by an uncompassionate NZ Government; and the growth of the weapons industry in New Zealand ('NZ: Peacemaker or arms exporter', Peter Matheson, *The Common Good*, Lent 2017: <http://catholicworker.org.nz/wp-content/themes/vendor-child-theme/cg/CG80-Lent-2017.pdf>).

The struggle to respect human dignity and to work for the common good also includes caring for our earth. The 'heads in the sand' approach toward increasing climate change, soil erosion and freshwater pollution calls out for change at government, corporate, community and individual levels.

We will, of course, have a chance in the spring elections to speak out and stand up for the values we want for Aotearoa New Zealand. But during Lent, we have the opportunity to practise some of these values by 'fasting' from aspects of our own lives that need transforming. We might choose to fast from or limit, for example, foods whose production or transportation causes excessive carbon to be released into our atmosphere: red meat and dairy products, or fruits and specialty foods imported from overseas.

Lenten carbon fasting calendars are a good way to become aware of and change the ways we each contribute to climate change and to harmful living situations for our third world brothers and sisters. One has been produced by the Anglican Church of South Africa's Environmental Network: <http://www.greenanglicans.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Carbon-Fast-Lent-2017.pdf>. Another with helpful links comes from the (Catholic) Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes of New South Wales: <https://goodshep.org.au/media/1730/lent-2017-carbon-fast-calendar.pdf>. A final example is from the global Catholic Climate Movement: <https://catholicclimatemovement.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/carbon-fast.pdf>. Alternatively, a daily Lenten email from the Massachusetts United Church of Christ can be received by signing up at <http://www.macucc.org/carbonfast>.

### **Prayer**

Jesus showed us many times how to spend time alone in prayer with God and discern the right way forward in life. He also left us with the powerful Lord's Prayer, in which we ask for the coming of God's reign on earth and the ability to live each day as it comes. Spending Lent with this prayer alone could be life-changing.

Many justice organisations also create Lent programmes for group or individual prayer and reflection. The 2017 Caritas resources offer deeply reflective sessions exploring the Sunday lectionary readings and then seeing them through the lens of issues like the war and refugee crisis in the Middle East or rising sea levels in Kiribati: <http://www.caritas.org.nz/system/files/LRP%20English%20version%20for%20web.pdf>. Insightful weekly reflections on non-violence are offered by Maryknoll (a US Catholic mission organisation), accompanied by appropriate suggestions for fasting (for example, from habits of not listening or not forgiving, or from technology like TV, cell phones or computers) as well as suggested actions for peace: <http://maryknollogc.org/sites/default/files/Maryknoll%20OGC%20Lenten%20Reflection%20Guide%202017.pdf>.

Cafod (the Catholic UK justice and peace organisation) offers a Lenten calendar which allows readers to click on a scripture reflection, prayer and action for each day of Lent. Readers can also sign up to get weekly reflections by email: <http://cafod.org.uk/Pray/Lent-Calendar>.

### **Giving**

Prayer and fasting allow us to spend time with God, reflect on the Word, increase our awareness of sinful situations and structures, and identify and change habits and actions which harm ourselves, others or our planet. Giving asks us to take a further step.

While financial giving to organisations like CWS or Caritas, which work to alleviate poverty and injustice, can be part of our giving, simply authorising an online payment may not be all we are called to do. Giving may also involve offering what is even more precious – our time and energy. These are critical in the endeavour to re-image and conform ourselves and our world according to Jesus' vision for God's reign of peace and justice.

How we give further of our time and energy depends a lot on how much we have of them given our age, ability, experience and stage of life. For some of us, discernment of these combined with prayer and awareness of justice issues, will lead us to spend more time with our children, our elderly parents or neighbours in our community. Some will research issues like housing, climate change or ethical investing, and teach, preach or write about them, or send emails to appropriate Government ministers or members of Parliament. Others will rally and protest, or work for change with groups or organisations. Still others will take the time to stop and spend time with someone on the footpath with a sign like 'Out of work and desperate – please spare a few coins.'

We cannot, of course, do something about everything. So how do we choose where to put our precious time and energy? Taking the time to listen to God's lead is a good starting place – whether God speaks to us in a church, on a beach, in a book, through a little child – or even on a website. God's way can surely also be found by listening to the deepest part of ourselves and our longings: how can I give life to others in a way that also gives life to myself?

The *metanoia* which is repentance, a change of heart and a turning toward our loving God is a life-long task. This Lent, exploring and choosing how best to practise fasting, praying and giving of ourselves are tangible steps along the journey of conversion to God's ways.