TO LENT OR NOT TO LENT

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If I were a pioneer missionary reaching out to the UK, I'm pretty sure that I would identify Lent as one of those times when British culture has a natural contact point with the gospel and I would seek to make deeper connections.
Category: Observations

Let it be said, that in many ways, I'm about as non-conformist, non-liturgical as you can get. Instinctively, I rebel against the idea of the church year and its associated festivals. I won't unpack my reasons for this, just take it that I'm an old Free Evangelical curmudgeon.

However, while I'm a natural iconoclast, I am enough of a historian to recognise that something would not have survived for as long as the concept of the church year if it did not have some value. I can see that in pre-literate societies, the rhythm of the church year, combined with the rolling of the seasons would have a value in teaching the message of the Gospels through a process of repetition. However, in an urban, literate society some of this value would undoubtedly be lost.

That being said, over the past few years, I've begun to think that churches in my tradition are missing a trick by not celebrating lent. Let me explain.

In our increasingly secular society, we struggle to find points of contact with the majority of people in the UK who are simply not interested in the things that churches talk about. However, there is still enough religious folk memory in the UK that many people talk about "giving something up for Lent". It's generally something fairly trivial and many/most people don't manage to avoid chocolate for the full forty days, anyway. But the principle is there. Over Lent, there are many folks who take a vague interest in religious stuff and surely, that provides an opportunity for churches to reach out to them.

For the last week, our local Facebook page has been knee-deep in invitations from the Anglican church to attend an Ash Wednesday service. Now, I'm not a great one for painting a cross on one's forehead, that sort of symbolism is completely lost on me. However, having people come to church to consider their own mortality and the need for repentance strikes me as an excellent idea - and if it takes a bit of symbolism to make it happen, I can live with that.

If I were a pioneer missionary reaching out to the UK, I'm pretty sure that I would identify Lent as one of those times when British culture has a natural contact point with the gospel and I would seek to make deeper connections. Perhaps those of us who live here and don't celebrate Lent (despite stuffing our face with pancakes on Shrove Tuesday) should consider the missional benefits of engaging with our communities at this time of year.

I know it means stepping out of our culture zone, but if we have to become a little more liturgical in order to introduce Christ to our neighbours, that's not too high a price to pay.