

# OUR LENTEN CHALLENGE: MOVE TOWARDS LIFE



Lent is a period of preparation for the crucial coming-alive event of Easter, so in deciding what to do for Lent choose something that will bring more energy into your life – and more love

*By Angela Graham*

I have been applying for jobs recently. Each job requires me to give an account of myself. Every application form is slightly different and, though I remain the same person with the same experiences, I have to present myself differently each time by emphasizing now this strength, now that one, depending on what I think the employer considers most important. I can tell you that though I usually like talking about “me”, I quickly got absolutely fed up with myself no matter how brilliant I kept telling each employer I am!

To be repeating one’s virtues and strengths does highlight how one-sided a person without faults can be. I didn’t really believe in the me on those application form pages and I’m the one who knows it’s all true! Something was missing from this account of me.

You know the kind of faultless person who might as well be dead? So bloodless and uncommitted. So safe in their virtue. They’ll never expose themselves to criticism. They’ll never offend anyone but they’ll never inspire anyone either. They tend to put a dampener on things. The rest of us feel they think we are not up to the mark and we suspect we are being judged. Well, I reckon that the job-application version of myself which missed out my faults was a bit like that.

## FRUITFUL CHANNELS

Growing in virtue is not about damping down energy. It’s about directing energy into fruitful channels. For instance, I have a friend who can be greedy. I remember my growing astonishment as I watched him eat a big lunch, then sample the whole range of desserts and still have room for coffee and chocolates, saying a few times as he did so, to no one in particular, “I missed breakfast, you see.” There is an anxiety at the root of this, a compulsion to “take care of myself,” as he puts it. It doesn’t actually do his health good. On the other hand – on the virtuous hand – he has tremendous zest for life. He is a great example of a hospitable person who knows how to celebrate and how to make life fun for others. He’s a party-giver, a seizer of life’s joys, a spreader of good will.

What would you advise my friend to do “for Lent”? Give up foodie treats? Perhaps. He might lose some weight and have to exert his patience and endurance to put up with the deprivation. But the emptiness that he sometimes fills with food, what is it? What is that emptiness? Perhaps he doesn’t really believe that God will take care of him and so he has to stock himself up and rely on himself. It could be that he needs to develop his faith in providence more than his willpower in resisting food. His “virtue” and his “vice” are linked in that they are both to do with taking desire seriously. It’s a question of moving the life-loving energy more in one direction than another.

In this sense we can benefit from our weaknesses because they help us see where we are misdirecting the energy – the life – God has given us. Penance shouldn’t be so like a tight band around us that we snap at the end of six weeks and return to our old shape. Instead, our self-discipline should free us from something that tends to hold us back from a fuller life.

## ASSESSING WHERE WE STAND

Preparing for Lent is like giving an account of ourselves to God. We assess what we can see we have done well and what our “weak” areas are. Fortunately, God is not an employer. He does a lot more than merely reward success. He sends his rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Though he requires some people to work in the heat of the day he asks others just for an hour’s labour, out of compassion for their capacities and perhaps for the deprivation they have suffered while they were on the sidelines. We don’t have to “sell ourselves” to God. He knows all about us already.

But even when we try to be objective we can find it hard to see ourselves as others see us and so it’s hard to know what our faults really are. In my family we have sometimes prepared for Lent together by sharing perceptions of one another.

## Change is always uncomfortable but sometimes we can welcome it because we know it will bring us alive.

My husband is a non-believer from a non-Catholic background. Our children have been raised as Catholics. One Lent my husband heard us discussing what to give up for Lent. He told us firmly that it was less a question of giving things up – “You Catholics are far too keen to do that” - than of aiming for a better balance in our lives. He begged me to eat as much chocolate as I wanted: “You’d be much more fun to live with!” He encouraged one child to share his feelings more and another to stop tending to take the blame for things, and so on. We felt that since he was entering into the thing so thoroughly he should take something on himself. “Oh, yeah!” he joked. “Like what? I’m perfect already!” But as families do, we put him right on this. We agreed that it would be great for us if he could stop giving evasive though amusing answers to straight questions. Ask him what time is it and you’d get a “Who wants to know?” response or some quip or other. That’s ok in casual relationships but at home it blocked conversations too often and we’d give up the effort to pursue the subject and sometimes serious things didn’t get addressed. He was taken aback as he hadn’t realised the effect this small fault had on us but he agreed to try for six weeks to answer questions simply. He did brilliantly well. He has lost that habit completely.

I read somewhere that when decent people try to improve themselves they often start by moving in the direction they already feel comfortable with because that’s the direction in which they believe virtue lies. So, an organised person will try to become more organised, or will try to become more flexible, but they’ll tackle this in a very organised way, making lists and so on. The result: little change.

## GET FEEDBACK

Change is always uncomfortable but sometimes we can welcome it because we know it will bring us alive. In preparing for Lent consider asking trustworthy people to give you some feedback on yourself. This may not be comfortable but you may well get praise too for qualities you have that you take little notice of – and thank God for that. There is also a risk someone will manipulate you by giving you advice to get you to behave merely in a way that suits him or her, so keep God involved in this process too. God is a great risk-taker. He even employs the unlikeliest people!

Lent itself is a period of preparation for the crucial coming-alive event of Easter. In deciding what to do for Lent choose something that will bring more energy into your life. Move towards Life because Easter is the great feast of Life, its triumph over Death. And do something that will help you put more love into your day. “Have I loved more today than yesterday?” is a good question for Lent. Penance is fruitful when it helps us love more. So I’ll get back now to the penance of filling in these forms, lovingly. Happy Easter. ■

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A native of Belfast, Angela Graham now lives in Wales and is a regular contributor to the religious press.

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