A Lent Observed

How are you observing Lent?
During the week whilst catching up with a not so old friend at Jackman and McRoss over a rack of lamb on a lovely fruit tart of some kind I was poked by the lady at the table next to me. She asked if I was an Anglican Priest. My clerical collar indicted the truth of the later part of the question and I confirmed the former. The three ladies at the table had been observing me, and decided that I wasn’t doing a very good job of observing Lent. I hadn’t given up enough.

Now Jesus does say that we are not to let people know that we are fasting and I have to say I thought my cover was pretty good.
But being observed seemingly not observing Lent leads me to make an observation about how many people observe Lent: they observe it as in watch, rather than observe as in participate. A cartoon I saw later in the week underlined this point. Two men are talking over pint in a pub. “Doing anything for Lent this year?” one asks. “Just the usual – solemnly observing the piety of others.”

So again are you observing Lent? Are you watching or participating?
I wish to offer some observations about Lent, thinking about what we might give up in Lent rather than simply give up on Lent, which finally will lead to observing what God gives up in Lent.

**OBSERVING THE HEART OF LENT**

The first thing to observe about Lent is that isn’t really about some changes in the décor of the Cathedral or changes in our eating habits, it is to observe and respond to the teaching and example of Christ.

The heart of his preaching is “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1:15) In his 40 days in the wilderness we see that even Jesus had to deal with temptation.

Central then to truly marking Lent is to hear this call to repent and resist temptation so that our life of faith will grow and we will observe changes in ourselves. Bishop John has written in his Lenten studies. “Lent leads to life through the painful process of looking carefully into the mirror of our outer and inner lives. Through reflection and repentance we find renewal.”

**OBSERVING PSALM 25**

The second observation that reflection on Scripture is a great way to do this.

**GOD’S WAYS NOT OURS**

Psalm 25:4-5 could be a motto or memory verse for Lent.

*Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.*

*Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.*
There is something immediately arresting to our usual way of thinking. This is a prayer that we would know God’s ways. There is then an immediate humility in this prayer. It is a far cry from I suspect the more common prayer of “bless my ways”.

Not our ways, but your ways, not leading but being lead, being taught not making it up ourselves. We are already dealing with issues of repentance and temptation.

Can you pray this prayer? Do you?

We also need to see that this is not asking for guidance in those stressful “Which path will I take?” moments when we all may say such prayers. This is not about special guidance but rather it is about laying down patterns of thinking so as to be “the foundation for right decisions.” (Kidner, 91) In Biblical thinking it is a prayer for wisdom and knowledge of God’s ways. It is about the discipline practiced day after day of seeking after God’s ways.

NEED FOR FORGIVENESS

It is no surprise as the Psalmist thinks about these things, God’s ways, paths and truth in the context of his own life that he quickly moves to repentance and his need of forgiveness.

Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness’ sake, O Lord!

These are the words of someone who has clearly observed his own life, and found it wanting. Interestingly it does seem to be being said by someone of riper years.

As you look at yourself in the light of God’s ways where do we need to ask God to be mindful of mercy? The temptation of course is not to spend the time observing ourselves long enough to come to that realisation.

There would be worse things to do each day of Lent than slowly read through these 4 verses looking for God to teach you his ways and asking for forgiveness for those areas where you have gone your own way.

OBSERVING GOD’S WAYS

But I find it interesting that throughout the Psalm despite how it helps with self reflection and seeking forgiveness the focus is not on the Psalmist and his failings but on the nature of God.

Observe the first 10 verses of the Psalm what do we learn about God.

Observe what is said about God in these verses.

verse 2-3 (protector), verse 6 (merciful), verse 7 (forgiving), verse 8 (good and upright), verse 10 (steadfast love and faithfulness), verse 8-9 (speaks and instructs)  

Thinking this through then in praying to be instructed in God’s ways is not a prayer that we would go in the way that God says we should go, they are the ways in which God himself goes. They are truly God’s ways.

Repentance is not so much turning from our all too human ways due to guilt but turning to the wonderful ways of God. God’s mercy, forgiveness, love, faithfulness and so on are not only our hope they are also our example.

We repent then not only because we observe our own ways but because we see God’s ways. Observing Lent will mean looking in both directions and knowing that our ways and God’s meet in forgiveness and grace when we turn to him.

OBSERVING JESUS

This idea of observing Lent by observing the nature of God bring us back very briefly to Gospel. For here in Jesus we see Immanuel, God with us. In Jesus we see
God’s salvation, mercy, love, faithfulness, forgiveness, and word come. In Jesus God and God’s kingdom come. If we took the time to properly observe Jesus we would more deeply understand the call to repent.

But we also see the lengths he will go through to bring this Kingdom come. In his baptism he full identifies with his sinful people, in his temptation he resist the pull to deny his true vocation as the bearer of God’s kingdom and other paths that he may take. The end to which he will go, which is the same as the end of Lent is to the cross on Good Friday. This is God’s way, and here we observe what God gave up for Lent, himself. He gave himself.

We will not truly observe Lent unless we understand that this is at the heart of God’s purposes, self giving. He gave of himself in Jesus to save us, and to show us that is God’s way that we are to follow. As the Collect for last week put it Jesus God’s Son was given “to be for us both a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life” His paths truly are ways of mercy, truth, righteousness, love. They are paths for us, he travels them for our salvation but he also calls us to join him on that path.

Here is where repentance and temptation meet, for the great temptation is to put ourselves at the centre, it was the temptation for Jesus, and it is what we are to repent of, to put God at the centre and give of ourselves for others.

Ponder how things in our world, family, church community would be different if we lived out this self giving nature of God out. This will not come about except by a sustained period of reflection on ourselves, on the nature of God in the Scriptures and the self giving sacrifice and example of Christ, and prayer, deep, deep prayer that God would teach us his ways and assure us of his forgiveness. This may take a long time, but a period of say, oh about 40 days, would be a good start.

If we did this and truly followed Christ and gave ourselves we would understand that we are not doing this for Lent but for God’s kingdom then I’m sure it would be a Lent that would be observed.