

# What Lent Is All About

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Our God and Father, grant that as we turn to your word, that you may speak to us in our hearts, and we may be given the capacity to hear those things that you have to say, not only to inform our minds, but to inflame our hearts in love for you.

We ask this in your holy name. Amen. Amen. One of the great advantages of being an Anglican is that on this day of the year, you can go around and say to your friends, may the charity of Quinquagesima be with you, and they won't know what you're saying.

And that gives you a frightfully superior feeling, that you know that and they don't. The Feast of Quinquagesima, which we're celebrating all out today, is steeped in history that nobody understands.

And lots of people really prefer their religion that way. And so, if you like that, there it is. On the other hand, it does introduce something which I think is worth you paying some particular attention to, and you can do that by turning in your prayer book to page 611.

And on page 611, you'll see the penitential service for Ash Wednesday. And this Ash Wednesday at 730, we're going to have as our visiting preacher, the Reverend Dr. Professor Oliver O'Donovan.

[ 1 : 4 8 ] I'm sure if we build him up too much, it'll be disastrous for him. But he's a great man and a great scholar, and it's going to be a delight to have him.

For those of you who may go to Regent College, I think he's speaking out there on Thursday at Noonar. But he's going to be here. We're going to begin our season of Lent on Wednesday night.

And in order to understand what Lent is all about, you will see that exhortation at the bottom of page 611, which says, Brethren, in the primitive church it was the custom to observe with great devotion the days of our Lord's Passion and Resurrection, and to prepare for the same by a season of penitence and fasting.

This season of Lent provided also a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for holy baptism. It was also a time when such persons as had by reason of notorious sins been separated from the body of the faithful, were reconciled and restored to the fellowship of the church by penitence and forgiveness.

Thereby the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution contained in the gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have of a renewal of their repentance and faith.

[ 3 : 1 9 ] I therefore invite you in the name of the church to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting, and self-denial, by reading and meditation upon God's holy word.

Now, you may not have been brought up in a tradition that observed Lent with that same kind of enthusiasm, contained enthusiasm, you might call it.

Well, the point is this, and that's what I want to talk to you about tonight, and that is how very difficult a thing it is to receive good news.

It doesn't come to us at first in the form of good news. And if you look in the story which was read as the Old Testament lesson, you'll see that, you'll see how difficult it was, and has always been, for men to receive good news.

And if you look in chapter 7, verse 35, you read about Joseph. Joseph may have been somewhat precocious, but nevertheless, he was very open and very honest.

[ 4 : 39 ] And it says in verse 5, Joseph had a dream. When he told it to his brothers, they only hated them the more. Well, the nature of the dream that Joseph had, there were two, and in one, he saw all his brothers as thieves of wheat and himself in the midst, and all of them bowing down to him.

Then in another dream, he was delighted to inform his brothers, he saw the ten stars and the sun and the moon, the eleven stars and the sun and the moon, all bowing down to him.

And by this time, it was no wonder that they hated him. And they hated him because, of course, his dream suggested that he was going to be greatly honored and that they were going to come and bow down to this little brother, who was only 17 years of age at that time, and the prospect of bowing down to him was not very agreeable.

Now, in fact, this vision, this dream of Joseph was to come wonderfully true. And this dream was an indication of the wonderful way in which God was going to provide for his people and for this little family of people who were living as the embodiment of the fulfillment of a promise of God which had been made to Abraham and which was going to be realized in their life and experience.

But since it came to them in the form of Joseph's dreams, instead of being delighted to hear of it because they, of course, didn't understand it, they hated him.

[ 6 : 43 ] Hated him with some enthusiasm. And so you have that strange reaction to the announcement of what, in the purpose and confidence of God, was going to save them as the family when those dreams were fulfilled.

It's interesting that it says about Joseph that in verse 11, his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

We'll come back to that point, but I want to show you what happened subsequently. You will know that having rejected in this rather splendid form of a dream in which the purpose of God was going to find fulfillment, they were aroused not with the wisdom of Jacob who pondered these things in his mind, but they were stirred up with a terrible jealousy.

So it happened that when the brothers were down pasturing the sheep, and Joseph was sent after them to find out how they were getting along and what was happening, that they saw him coming.

And so destroyed were they by their jealousy that they determined among themselves that they would put him to death.

[ 8 : 17 ] And they had it all worked out, and their passion of jealousy was to be realized in the death of Joseph.

Well, when he came near, they took him and they threw him in a pit. One of his older brothers, Reuben, suggested that they not kill him, just leave him there.

And Reuben, it turns out, wanted to go back and find him and restore him to his father so as to save the family from this tragedy. But the brothers were not prepared to do that.

Then subsequently in the story, they were saved, as it were, by the Ishmaelites who were coming down from Gilead bringing some forms of balm and medicine that they were taking down to Egypt.

And they were, they had Joseph sold to them for 20 pieces of silver. And Reuben apparently was away at the time and was terribly distressed to find that he was gone.

[ 9 : 22 ] They took the magnificent many-colored green coat which Joseph wore. They slew an animal and rolled the coat in his blood.

And then they sent it to Jacob. And when they sent it to Jacob, they didn't say what had happened. They just sent it to him and said, now, do you recognize this coat?

And of course, they didn't have to tell a lie. The lie was involved in doing that and Jacob immediately concluded not only did he recognize the coat, but he recognized that the owner of the coat, his favorite son, Joseph, had been killed by wild animals and his hope of any consolation during the course of this life had been taken away.

He was destroyed as a man. Well, you just see what happens here. What they had done in terms of their activity to date was they had rejected the vision which God had given them.

Now, I find that when you're telling people, I mean, you read the Bible stories to people and they hear them for the first time, there is within our sinful and rebellious hearts a kind of rejection, a rejection of that whole pattern as being something which will cause, quote, which will demand from us a kind of submission which we're not prepared to give.

[ 11 : 00 ] And because we're not prepared to give it, so we find the, our kind of passionate rejection of the purpose of God in the same way that the brothers rejected the purpose of God when it came to them in the form of this dream of Joseph.

And so they decided that they would do their own thing. And they thought, what will come of his dreams if he suddenly finds himself dead?

And so they planned to put him to death and were just saved from that by the compassion of an older brother and then by the province of God instead of being left to perish in the wilderness, he was picked up as a slave and taken into Egypt which turned out to be the wonderful means of the fulfillment of God's purpose.

But what had they done in the meantime? Well, they had killed an animal. They had soaked his coat in the blood. They'd taken the, they'd sent it to the father and allowed him to draw his own conclusion that his favorite son had been killed by a wild animal.

None of them had to go and in a bare-faced way tell him the lie they allowed him to come to the conclusion by himself and then when they all returned they came to comfort him.

[ 12 : 25 ] So they began to work on this deception which they were building but Jacob, it says, refused to be comforted. And so what had happened was that instead of the purpose of God they had deliberately manufactured this lie about Joseph and left their father with all the tremendous burden of mourning which was upon him.

But that's not all that happened because something else happened which we could have discovered in the careful reading of our lesson tonight that the relationship between the brothers degenerated very badly because they had to perpetuate the lie.

Now, what I think happens in our lives is that we very often refuse the known purpose of God refuse to submit to it as they refuse to submit to the dream of their brother Joseph.

It wasn't his idea It was given to him in a dream. They refused to submit. So we refuse to submit to the purpose of God and create a lie around which we are prepared to live in preference to that.

And this lie was something which was manufactured out of their own passion and the terrible jealousy which afflicted them.

[ 13 : 59 ] And they thought that life would be a lot simpler having denied the purpose of God as they thought by getting rid of this young man who seemed destined to be the fulfillment of the purpose of God they got rid of him and chose to live the lie instead.

Well, I think this is what happens to us in terms of the agony which we experience because we build our life around something we choose to believe rather than something we are given to believe.

And so when it happened that they had done that you get into the peculiar situation where they went down to Egypt because the famine came to the land they presented themselves to the thief man of Egypt and the thief man of Egypt happened to be Joseph their brother.

Sir Walter Scott says the finest prose in Egypt is the story which is read as the lesson for tonight. The story of Joseph revealing himself to his brother.

the difficulty is that now they weren't prepared to receive it because the lie around which they had constructed their life had to be broken and instead of feeling that this was the best of good news which had come to them in the news that their brother was still alive it says that they were terribly dismayed and they couldn't answer being dismayed at his presence that's in 45 verse 3 so having committed themselves to a lie when finally at the end of many years they are suddenly confronted with the truth of the providential and sovereign purpose of God how do they receive it?

[ 16 : 19 ] they receive it with great dismay you see that strange reality is that if God is going to break into your life with good news look at the burden look at the barriers that he has to overcome before he can do it look at the opposition there is to be look at the problem Joseph had in standing up before them and declaring who he was look if you want at the end of chapter 44 and watch the skillful way in which Joseph drew out of his brother Judah the story the story of the father the story of the brother who was dead the story of how the father had set his affection on Benjamin and loved Benjamin best of all and the story of how this situation had gone on year after year and think of the terrible tension that grows up between people as they lived with a lie at the sort of center of their relationship because all the brothers knew what had happened and they couldn't have had much affection for one another knowing that this burden of guilt lay equally on all of them and so instead of drawing them together the lie in a sense slowly destroyed them as they perpetuated it year after year and that kind of tragedy afflicts us in our society in the same way living in a lie which in order to preserve any sense of propriety the lie must be preserved everybody must acknowledge it nobody is allowed to break the covenant under which the lie was established in the first place and the relationship between us deteriorates and deteriorates because the truth is too expensive the truth is going to hurt way too much they can't do it they can't do it to each other they can't do it to their father and so it happens and as it happens and as the famine closes in on them and their sense of guilt and their sense of having built their life around this fabrication all of these things pile up on them and they're at the place where when the good news is finally broken to them and Joseph stands before them and says

I am Joseph your brother instead of their hearts being lifted up with thanksgiving they're the things they're very unhappy they find it very difficult to come to terms with this reality nevertheless Joseph persists he falls on his brother Benjamin's neck and weeps and all the members of Pharaoh's household become aware of the exciting news that's breaking in their midst that the brethren of Joseph have come and all the sort of excitement and joy of it goes through the household of Pharaoh but the brothers are still fairly heavy in their having received the news they're not able to take it so when Joseph sends them home back to get their father if you look at the text you will see a very strange statement in verse 24 he says to them do not quarrel on the way well you can imagine the recriminations that would break up you can imagine the accusations having confronted the truth now all the years of the conspiracy of silence would break up and all the accusations they would have against one another it was your idea in the first place and you insisted we wanted to do it and I didn't want to do it but you insisted that we do do it and it was you that caused it and you can imagine how the whole relationship between the brothers because the good news had been broken to them would all break down in mutual accusations and recriminations against one another so Joseph says don't quarrel in the way because they weren't really prepared to receive the good news that Joseph was alive because now they had to go back over all the years that they had lived carefully perpetuating the lie about the fate of

Joseph watching their father year after year go into decline and go down to his grave in sorrow as they saw the defense taking place as the father broken heart goes down the dock only when Joseph says go back to your father but leave Benjamin with me as purity against your return they are forced to admit that they can't leave Benjamin because of the condition of their father and the sorrow that afflicted them so they're there caught in that kind of situation they go back to Egypt and bring Joseph to be with them and Joseph received the good news that says I will go and see him before I die well there's a very real sense and that's what

Lent is all about Lent is because you and I in our conspiracy and in our sophisticated lies in the deceptions which we perpetuate and maintain among ourselves get ourselves to the place where we're not prepared to receive the good news and so our hearts aren't ready for it they weren't ready for it when Joseph told them their victory nor were they ready for it when at the end of their lives in which they thought they could eke out the rest of the time that was given to them by perpetuating this lie to the very end and suddenly the lie was revealed and they were terribly dismayed and convicted because because though Joseph stood before them and said I'm

Joseph they couldn't receive that good news and the tragedy of evil as it ended is that our hearts are not prepared to have the one whom we have taken and by wicked hands have crucified and slain stand up before us and say behold I am alive forevermore because our hearts are not prepared instead of being able to rejoice in that we are doing it so the whole season of Lent is to be a time of careful reading and a time of meditation and a time of confession and a time of self examination and a time to look at the motives of our hearts and a time to look at the deceptions and the lies which we can more comfortably live with in this sophisticated world and a time to examine them all again so that when we come to that day when it is announced

[ 24 : 52 ] Jesus Christ is risen to death and the brother who was dead is risen among us and brings with us that which we hadn't even dared to hope for and that was that in spite of our sinfulness in spite of our treacherous in spite of the passions of jealousy and hatred which afflict us God is working out his sovereign purpose in our midst and has taken the very thing which we had meant for evil and redeeming it and transforming it in to the very basis on which he is doing us great good and bringing to us salvation we need to be able to receive hahaha and to get to what