

Ten Ideas for Lent based on The Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book for 2011
Barefoot Disciple: Walking the Way of Passionate Humility by Stephen Cherry
Continuum Press 2011

Take Off Your Shoes

We have all walked barefoot and felt the earth beneath our feet. And we all played barefoot when we were children. But have you ever prayed barefoot? Do it once and you won't forget it. It will touch your imagination. Try it out of doors. As you feel the world through the soles of your feet, you will begin to realise the spiritual relevance of the material world. As a barefoot disciple living in a northern country you will, most of the time, be well shod. But if spiritually your feet are bare, you will tread carefully and walk differently. You and your prayer will be earthed, real, humble.

Admit a Recent Mistake

Just one will do. Notice when you have made a mistake and own up to it quickly, simply and honestly. And then let it go. Do not seek forgiveness unless the mistake has really hurt someone. If you say 'sorry' as a habit, stop it now. You are devaluing the currency. The idea is to acknowledge that you are a mistake-maker for much of the time. This is an exercise in realism and true modesty. Once you have mastered it, you will no longer try to cover up the mistakes you make in daily living. Rather you will find them to be opportunities to learn humility. After a while you might even develop the confidence to begin to address the mistakes for which you really do need to ask forgiveness.

Pocket an Insult

The phrase is Ghandi's. He is a barefoot walker who can speak to us from another faith. It means: 'do not take an insult personally', 'do not take it to heart', 'do not react'. But, equally, it does not mean 'ignore it and it will go away'. Rather, if you are on the receiving end of an insult, it is rarely going to be helpful to react. Instead, pop it into your pocket and, after a while, take it out to see whether it is worth responding to carefully and humbly. Such humility can be determined and powerful, but it is never hot-headed or full of smouldering resentment.

Behave as a Child

Jesus says that children are at home in the kingdom of God. And so he wants adults to be childlike. What could be more fun than that! This is your the invitation to let the child within out to play. The child in you is naive, impulsive, direct, simple, trusting, vulnerable, unsophisticated and unpretentious. Jesus tells us that this is a really most important part of who we are. If the inner child does not thrive then nor do we. Let your inner child out to play. It knows how to live.

Step across a Boundary

Visit somewhere that feels a bit scary, uncomfortable or even provocative to you. For many Christian people, a visit to the place of worship of people of another faith is uncomfortable and disorienting enough to wake them up to the fascination, depth and quality of their own faith. So visit a Mosque, Synagogue, Hindu Temple or Sikh Gurdwara. Risk putting yourself in a situation where you know that you will not fully understand what is going on and feel like an outsider. Pay attention to your feelings and let your bewilderment and confusion enhance your learning, your wonder and your enjoyment of the experience. Afterwards try to describe your experiences in a notebook or perhaps to a friend who agrees to step out of his or her comfort zone too.

Give up Grumbling

Do you remember Terry Waite's vow when taken into captivity: 'no self-pity'? It is a good one but it is far more difficult than we realise. So take the trouble to tune in to the grumbling that you hear around you (and which sometimes comes from your own mouth). It will be difficult to give up grumbling for good, so start by giving it up for Lent. After you have done without it you will wonder why you ever bothered with it. And if you can't give it up, try to transform it into protest, penitence or petition. You will soon find you have a new passion for both justice and prayer.

Practise Hospitality

Take the trouble to notice the people you don't usually notice. Offer a greeting when others are locked in silence. Learn how to wave in an affirming, positive way. Learn how to smile across a room or make eye-contact across a meeting to support someone who is struggling. You can't be friends with everyone, but by being friendly you can touch, and perhaps change, many people's lives and even have an impact on the whole social environment of a neighbourhood. Don't think that you need to turn your home into a refuge for ex-prisoners in order to exercise true hospitality. Simply take one small but deliberate step in the direction of being more hospitable.

Do Something for Someone Else

Do something simple, modest but practical for someone else. It might involve giving someone an unexpected gift or offering to help lift something. Such gratuitous and caring action can touch the heart and imagination and have untold positive repercussions. But don't be excessive. Don't take over. Don't create dependency. Lend a hand but try not to 'make a suggestion'. It is modest, humble, practical generosity that is called for. Not grand projects or patronising performances.

Be Proud of Yourself

Surprised by this suggestion? While bad pride is to be avoided there is such an experience as good pride. It is a very down to earth feeling and we have it when we allow ourselves to look at work well done with kind and straightforward eyes. It is childlike to have good pride, because there is nothing arrogant or conceited in it. Good pride accepts praise gratefully but humbly and allows you to recognise that your efforts are worthwhile and achievements valid. Good pride is not pushy and might be expressed modestly: 'hmmm, not bad'. It is a good feeling and not only consistent with healthy humility - but a sign of it. Meanwhile try to shake off all forms of bad pride: arrogance, conceitedness and chauvinism. But also try to do away with false modesty. No more 'little me', thank you.

Encourage Others

Encouraging others is the opposite of criticising them. Whereas criticism comes from meanness of spirit encouragement comes from generosity of spirit. As such it reflects something of God's love. Also, whereas criticism often comes from envy, encouragement comes from a desire to see others thrive and flourish. Criticism can come from a spirit of competition or fear, whereas to encourage people involves noticing what they are contributing. Tell people you have noticed the difference that their effort has made or let them see that you acknowledge their difficulty or suffering. We are often a bit stingy with our encouragement, for fear of causing others to swell in pride. The truth is that when encouragement is sincere and appropriately expressed, it nurtures genuine humility. Allow people the joy of feeling truly humbled and really encouraged by what you say.