

The days we call Lent

Living the 40-day season of preparation for Easter within the constraints of a daily pattern that remains largely unchanged



We are now in the early days of Lent and the great Paschal feast is still weeks away. The Lenten season is spent in different ways by different people. Some give up something, while others take on a new challenge. And others of us might try to read a little more or set aside greater time for prayer in a busy world. Yet in the end we each prepare ourselves in an individual way; we become for a few weeks a small island of experience. We move out to the margin and silently watch the surging sea break on the sand edge, smooth stones and shale, rolled and salt washed. We take some time to be alone with the Lord, time maybe to listen. That in itself can be an immense challenge, it takes courage to face squarely who we are. Open grassland, treeless and torn by the wind's rage, empty distance beyond the fence, where sea-wail and sky-howl touch the

moon-cold night. This can be an awesome place of utter loneliness where words lead back in loops unless abandonment is complete -- this distant, desolate, island home. By nature we are gregarious, enjoying the company of family and friends, the nights out, holidays, meals, and the day-to-day busyness of life.

A time to listen

That gives rise to two different standpoints. Some long for the peace and quiet of solitude, worn to a frazzle by their style of living. Others find the experience threatening and feel uncomfortable without the buzz they have grown used to. Maybe that is why liturgical action so often involves words and song, readings and sermons. The space between words, the silence of stillness, is lost and we feel bereft. We can recapture that stillness in the remoteness of an island when the dissolving darkness at the sky's edge makes way for a thread of orange, a breeze from the ocean. After the storm, the distant tide begins to turn and you can walk the shore again. There you can find a personal place of solitude where only gulls wheel and screech, hunting for food, a place of isolation, where your voice, calling across the sand, receives no reply. A time to listen. In such time, we can find a place of peace. As slowly we walk the stirring sea-edge, expecting nothing, no-one calls our name. A time to listen. But only a very few of us can manage the time of emptiness that an island offers.

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