

Ash Wednesday 2020

Imagine you have a bag or container to fill and it's touch and go whether it is big enough or whether the neck is wide enough for what you have to put in it.

Of course, you gently squeeze and stretch the container so that it is fit for purpose.

Imagine now that *you* are the container in question.

Lent is a time for squeezing and stretching the container – which is us – to able to be filled with what God wants, in other words himself.

How is that possible? There is a wonderful traditional image of Mary showing her with Jesus in her breast: the title of the image is “She who contains the uncontainable.” “Containing the uncontainable” is not only a privilege of Mary: it is something to which we are all called.

People sometimes think of Lent as a gloomy time, a time for doing without things we enjoy. Just try to refocus instead on what it promises: a fuller awareness of God's presence, which, unlike the things we “give up”, lasts for ever.

That's the point. We tend to fill our lives and our days with all sorts of temporary satisfactions, great as long as they last, but where are they at the end? “At the end” is the question addressed to each one of us as Lent begins.

St John tells us where we shall be at the end: we shall be like Jesus, for we shall see him as he is. Our question is Mary's question to the angel at the annunciation “how can this be?” It's impossible, she said. Oh no, said the angel, “with God nothing will be impossible.”

The point of all this is that the whole of our earthly life is an opportunity to grow, to expand, in our ability to receive what the whole universe is not big enough to contain. But the six weeks of Lent are a specially privileged time to try to grow in faith, hope and love. All the traditional disciplines of Lent are an exercise to help with this, and we shall discover that our capacity grows, because unlike the bag I began with, there is really no limit.

Well, that's not strictly true, because in order to be filled with faith, hope and love, we need to clear out the junk that is already cluttering us up. This is where repentance comes in. It's not enough just to have pious thoughts and longings; we also need to make space for them to flourish. So, as well as the squeezing and stretching I am talking about, we need some spring cleaning. Spend time this Lent asking what limits we ourselves put in the way of God's desire to fill us. But above all, ask God everyday to increase your faith, hope and love, to expand the capacity of your heart to receive the uncontainable gift of God himself.