

Vicar's Letter

Dear Friends

The 40 day period ('Lent') that runs up to Easter Day is a period of fasting by longstanding Christian tradition and practice. The principle is that during this period you voluntarily deny yourself something. Often it is an indulgence such as chocolate or alcohol – or even Facebook or television. It has to be something that you like (there is no merit in giving up something you dislike!) and it has to be something good; after all, if it's bad you ought to give it up permanently, not just take a break from it. The whole idea strikes many people today as bizarre - but yet it has never been more relevant in a culture is utterly fixated on having things immediately, now.

This obsession with the instantaneous and immediate can be seen in almost everywhere: The enticement to credit - buy now, pay later (whether individually or as a nation) - instant food (long live the microwave); television programmes on demand, when we want; instant messaging; instant downloads of music, films or books. We don't 'do' waiting anymore. Whether it's food, pleasure, sex or possessions, we expect to have them all now. Yet there is something very dangerous about this demand for 'instant gratification' and it's not just Christians who say so.

The reality is that all good things (and food, pleasure, sex or possessions are exactly that) are truly at their best only when they are taken at the right time. Deliberately delaying a pleasure is actually a wise thing. The ability to postpone our gratification is part of what fulfills us as human beings. After all, if you want your pleasures now, you are really going to struggle with things like learning to play the piano or acquiring a foreign language where it may be months before you can tap out that tune or engage in a meaningful conversation on holiday.

To decide to postpone a pleasure is one of the things that distinguishes us from the animals. One the great breakthroughs in history was when people realised that instead of eating grains of wheat or rice it was a far smarter thing to plant them and wait a few months until the crops sprang up. It was cultivation that led to settlements and the flourishing of civilisation.

The ability to postpone taking something good and desirable is something that has continued to play an important part in culture. The Industrial Revolution came about in part because people (particularly Christians) decided that rather than spending their money on instant pleasure they would invest it in industries for long-term gain. A word in season for those invest our savings and pensions.

But it's not just history that teaches us about the disadvantages of instant gratification; there is also some well founded psychological evidence. In the 1970s the 'Stanford Marshmallow Experiment' took a group of four-year-old children. Each child was given one marshmallow and promised that, if they could wait twenty minutes before eating it, they would be given a second one. Some children could wait and others couldn't. Records were kept and sixteen years later the university researchers revisited the children and found that those who had been able to delay eating were scoring significantly higher in academic tests. The ability to say 'no, not now' seems to be vital for education.

You may not be observing Lent as you read this, but then you're missing an opportunity to grow in self-control and self-discipline and you'll be less human than you might have been as a result.

With every blessing
Philip de Grey-Warter

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