

# Along the track

## Lent and Almsgiving

One of the benefits of modern media is that information is so readily available. We can find out just about anything! We can stay in touch easily, communication is so much more efficient. The world comes to our doorstep, even right into our lounge rooms. That can have many advantages but it can have its downsides too. Sometimes we can suffer from information overload and charity fatigue.

Those who work for international aid agencies and local charities tell us that collecting money is so much harder. We are assailed by so much bad news, so many tragedies, so many refugees, so many catastrophes that we turn off, we have become a bit 'immune' or we wonder 'what can one person do to help all of that?' 'What difference would the little I have to offer make?' 'How do I know it will get to them anyway?' The sheer number of organisations vying for funds can also overwhelm us, as well as the 'in-your-face' fundraising tactics used by some. While surveys indicate that many people feel charities overspend on fundraising, when there is so much need and so many charities vying for our dollar, spending on fundraising advertising may well be understandable.

On the other hand, there are those who just don't want to give money. It's not unusual to hear: "Don't get me wrong, I fully respect charities and the people who raise money for them but...." It is easy enough to find a reason NOT to give. On the other hand, some would rather do something more personal, more local, more immediate.

But if we are not giving, then what are we doing? How do we contribute to the lives of others, to the human family, especially those who need our help? We are all diminished by the suffering of others, the starvation, the injustice, the cruel treatment metered out to the most vulnerable. As St Paul wrote: If one part suffers, every part suffers with it.... (1 Cor 12:26).

Or do we just move on, sad that so many are suffering 'but what can I do?' And millions of people live on—shattered, poor, lost, hungry and forgotten—and along comes another news item.

Almsgiving is important. Lent reminds us of that. Lent reminds us that we need each other. We can easily get wound up in our own lives, our own 'rat race', we can become very self-absorbed, very focussed on our own needs and goals, ambitions and dreams. Learning that 'giving is part of living' is important. It is good to see in our schools, Project Compassion and other activities that encourage personal generosity, that raise awareness right from the start that we are a human family, each dependent on one another. It is even better, however, if that is modelled in the home.

It is not by chance that Lent highlights almsgiving, not just as another way of doing penance but rather the Lenten discipline of almsgiving reminds us that all we have is a gift

- life itself and just about everything thereafter. In contrast, advertising would have us believe that we create ourselves, we make our own future and happiness is dependent on the things we purchase, what we own, what we amass. Almsgiving can be a reality check – it gives us the opportunity to reflect on the saying, 'if you want to see what people really believe in, take a look at how they spend their money'

Almsgiving also gives us the opportunity to place the needs of others before ourselves and give generously from our own resources. In the words of Pope Francis, gratitude should be one of the characteristics of being a Christian because 'aware of having received everything from God freely, that is without any merit, (a Christian) learns to give to others freely'. Almsgiving is a sign of genuine gratitude because 'alms are given to someone from whom you would not expect to receive anything in return'.

Giving isn't about making us feel good. It is about assisting those who are in need of help, of food, shelter, clothing. There are literally millions of people in our world community who are starving, who live in hopeless situations. Our generosity can do more than provide immediate help for them – it can help to change the underlying systems that keep people in the bondage of poverty and crushing injustice. It can help to help train people in new skills, to find solutions to their own problems, to make a lasting contribution. While it is always helpful to give locally, to give to local situations of tragedy or hardship or devastation caused by floods or storms or whatever, giving to change systems, to help people develop new skills is equally important and long lasting.

Lent reminds us that there is more than one way to give and the earlier we start to take that on board, the better. It is a habit to foster early on in life. Almsgiving doesn't always involve money – there are many ways to contribute to the lives of others. Almsgiving can also mean that we give of our time, our expertise, our talents and skills. I once visited a church community where everyone was asked to make a commitment for Christ every week, to spend at least one hour in the service of somebody in the community – to mow someone's lawn, to visit someone who was sick, to help repair something, to use our skills in service of someone else. Or just to volunteer to do something – to see a need and do something about it. It was one of the most vibrant faith communities I had ever seen.

What can one person do? More than we can imagine!!

Regards  
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