

What Will Bring You More Fully Alive This Lent?

By Fr. Tom Ryan.

The word "Lent" originally referred to the lengthening of days in the northern hemisphere through increased light. From this original meaning, confirmed in the movement from winter's darkness to spring's increasing vitality, we are invited to move out of our own personal lethargy to vitality, from ashes to the paschal feast. Lent, in short, is about coming to life in new ways. It is about growth.

Lasse Halstrom's film "Chocolat", (nominated) for five Academy Award nominations (in 2001), provides a wonderful cinematic metaphor for the season and for eucharistic community. A single mother and her daughter come to a small village in France and open a chocolate shop. The chocolate, produced from pure ground cocoa bean mixed with red chili pepper powder, mysteriously releases the deepest yearnings and reveals the destiny of those who eat it.

As in "Babette's Feast", deeply religious overtones abound: the villagers are drawn around a common table where little stories of reconciliation are played out and repressed yearnings released between widow and widower, between a grandson and his grandmother, between parent and child. People come alive in relationship in new ways.

The Christian creed calls the Holy Spirit the "Giver of Life." The Spirit is always anonymously at work within every human life, within me, within you, drawing our attention to this, to that, opening our eyes, making us aware, awakening all that is truly human in us, all that is most real.

How appropriate that "Chocolat" should begin with Lent and end with Easter Sunday, for Lent is the season par excellence in which the Giver of Life strives within our dull, frightened little spirits to bring us more fully alive. And how ironic that the people who awaken to their own dignity, to the possibility of love, do so in the story by partaking of that very thing which traditional Lenten practice finds most Catholics giving up: chocolate!

What better way to invite us to look at things in a new way, to open ourselves up to new possibilities, for the Spirit has so much more to give us than the occasional inspiration or prompting, so much more than those rare moments of "seeing in a new way". Those are but hints of a more permanent aliveness towards which the Holy Spirit is constantly nudging us.

The essential gift the Lord and Giver of Life wants to give us is aliveness-coming alive towards other people, coming alive to the glory and the tragedy of this world, coming alive towards the reality of ourselves, coming alive to our responsibility in society, local and worldwide, coming alive towards the scriptures and the life of prayer, alive to the presence of Jesus Christ and the deep, energizing joy of God.

How easily we forget the assertion of John 10:10: "Christ came that we might have life, and have it to the full!"

The figure of Jesus emerges in all the gospels as one who was supremely responsive and aware. The insight of Vianne, the chocolate-maker, to the needs and likes of whoever walked into her shop remind one of John's words about Jesus: "He knew all people and had no need of evidence from others about anyone, for he knew what was in a person" (2:25). Vianne knew just kind of chocolate would bring them alive according to their yearnings.

When we grasp that the spirit of Lent is to reflect the lengthening of the light within our own living, the question for our special Lenten practice becomes: what will bring me more alive? What will pull me from the waters of deadening routine? What will help me break out of my unhealthy compulsions and move me in the direction of more vitalized living and loving?

In that context, we might find ourselves drawing up a Lenten program that involves opening our spirits to more art through visits to museums and galleries, to more music through concerts. We might find ourselves opening our hearts by reserving an evening a week with friends to relax and enjoy life. We might find ourselves opening up our bodies to fuller health by taking out a membership at the local health club, or committing ourselves to a daily walk. We might find ourselves sharing God's love with the homeless, the hungry, and the lonely.

Anglican Bishop John V. Taylor wrote in his little book *A Matter of Life and Death*: "It has long been my conviction that God is not hugely concerned whether we are 'religious' or not. What matters to God, and matters supremely, is whether we are alive or not. If your religion brings you more fully to life, God will be in it. But if your religion inhibits your capacity for life or makes you run away from it, you may be sure God is against it, just as Jesus was."

At the end of "Chocolate", the young parish priest mounts the pulpit and delivers his Easter message: "Goodness can't be measured by what we don't do, by what we give up, by who we exclude. Goodness can only be measured by what we embrace, by what we create, by who we include."

Every Lent, the choice God gave the people in Deuteronomy 30 is set squarely before us: "Today I offer you the choice of life and death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then, that you may live."