

Ash Wednesday 2005.

An insightful friend suggested to me that Australians' fascination with television renovation programmes might be a metaphor for present Australian spirituality. My friend meant that Australians are besotted by external renovations - rooms, houses, backyards - yet what they are really searching for and longing for is renovation of their own lives.

Of course, this is a standard and perennial confusion. We are inwardly disturbed and we try to satiate the disturbance or smooth over the disturbance by some external activity, like shopping needlessly, or drinking alcohol or taking drugs or attending to our body shape. There are endless variations on the distraction from the inner restlessness that is crying out for renovation.

I am suggesting that yet one more time a whole culture -contemporary Australia - has confused an inner need with an external solution, much like Germans did with Nazism.

Jesus, especially in the more radical gospel of Mark, cuts to the chase with his diagnosis that it is what goes on inside us that stresses us, not what happens externally. That particular observation was made in reference to the meticulous and strict purity requirements of the Pharisees about food and crockery. They almost required a portable dish washer to go out with them socially in order to stay non-contaminated from their social surrounds.

Attention to the inner life is indeed demanded by the inner life. Inattention spawns disquiet, lethargy, restlessness, and addictive responses and practices. The inner life requires nurturing, feeding, support, and understanding.

This is the very point of Lent.

We enter from today an extensive period - a biblical period of possibility (40 days) - to be seriously and intentionally alert to our inner lives, our spirituality, what motivates and informs us as disciples.

Lent can therefore be a kind of renovation. Jesus once used an image of the interior of a house to describe a man's collapsing inner world. So renovation under the spirit is not an inappropriate metaphor for our time of Lent.

I suggest that you determine before Sunday the form or structure of your Lenten observance. Just how are you going to go about inner renovation. What materials are you going to use?

For instance, are you going to provide a certain quantity of space - like 15 or 30 minutes for reflection, stillness and prayer? Are you going to use imaginative aids, like a purple candle, or a picture of wilderness, or a bible verse, or recorded music?

And what will be the focus of your reflection?

Might it be, for example, thinking of the turning points in your life, and teasing these out to see their impact upon you - how you have been shaped by them? And where to now with them?

I recently read Tim Winton's The Turning. These are engaging short stories that interconnect surprisingly, and question turnings in one's own life. These stories provoked me to think again on situations or persons or events or my own actions that in retrospect had acted as turnings in my own life's journey. I realised anew how I was still living with and sometimes under the influence of such turnings.

The frontispiece of the novel says,

Here are turnings of all kinds –changes of heart, nasty surprises, slow awakenings, sudden

detours – where people struggle against the terrible weight of the past and challenge the lives they've made for themselves.

Might you draw, as it were, a kind of road map of your life thus far? How would you evaluate this?

Or might you reflect on the journeys that people made in the Bible and use a different journey for each of the six weeks of Lent?

Week One might trace the journey of Abram to Canaan, the Promised Land.

Week Two might trace the Exodus and the wanderings in the wilderness.

Week Three might trace the entry once again into the Promised Land.

Week Four might trace the journey of Elijah to Mount Carmel.

Week Five might trace a typical ministry journey of Jesus in Mark's gospel.

Week Six might trace the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem.

Much could be gained from such a use of Holy Scripture when you lay that upon your own life's journey. There might be much that illuminates your present spiritual situation, and indicate where renovation is needed.

In any case, whatever you decide upon, attend to your inner life or it will assert itself in negative, pain-causing ways that will simply distress you.

Lent -a spiritual version of Backyard Blitz, Changing Rooms, ...