

**St Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake**  
**The Third Sunday in Lent, year 'C'**  
**20 March 2022**  
**The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

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I think it was Coco Chanel who said, “The best things in life are free. The second best are very expensive.”

My friend Bryan's late mother, who grew up in post-war Germany, and therefore knew a thing or two about both frugality and quality, believed in buying the best one could afford—but not to excess. You bought the best clothes you could afford, the best car, the best kitchen utensils, the best bedding—and so on. You bought the best and cared for it assiduously and if you were lucky it would last, if not for a lifetime, then for a good many years.

Her philosophy clearly isn't embraced by our consumer culture—as is proved by a trip to the mall. It's astonishing how much there is to buy *and* how much of it is of poor quality. Even so-called “designer wear” is mass-produced. Yet it's sold at prices more appropriate for truly handmade items, despite the fact that these things tend to wear out as quickly as the cheaper stuff. But that, of course, is part of the strategy by which so many people are caught up in an almost never-ending cycle of buying more stuff which won't last and which they don't need.

Taken to an extreme, these acquisitive impulses can become pernicious and destructive. We need only think about those television shows about hoarders who become tragically consumed with the preservation of junk—literal junk—in whose lives the materialistic values of our culture have run amok. These people are truly victims of a society which measures worth in how much we have.

Contrast these shows with the Japanese organizational maven Marie Kondo who has a new show on Netflix. Now, some of her methods are bizarre—at least to me—but the core message that it's liberating to get rid of all the clutter and unnecessary junk is good. And the thing I really like is that her system of organization calls people to mindfulness, to think seriously about priorities, and to cultivate an attitude of thankfulness.

As we heard in the prophet Isaiah, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?”

Perhaps one response to this question is that we spend on that which doesn't satisfy because we don't know where to find that which does. We're told that God alone can satisfy, but like the psalmist we cry out, “O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a barren and dry land where there is no water.” God often seems powerfully absent—a very unsatisfying feeling. All of

us have had periods of spiritual dryness, when it feels as if we're living in a desert, when we cry out to God and there's only silence. But I think this dryness, this seeking and longing, is built into the system—strange though that may sound. It's no accident that Lent always begins with the story of Jesus in the wilderness. Alone in a dry place, free of worldly cares but also aware not of the presence of God but of Satan, he discovered the truth about himself and the truth of what God wanted of him.

Lent is our wilderness experience, a season in which we are invited to stop chasing after things that never satisfy. We're invited to do this because to know God, we need to get away from things which make life cluttered and perhaps even unmanageable. We need to find ways to get away from the gods who have trapped us and control us but whose promises of happiness never last.

In these Lenten days there may well be times when it feels like we're living in a barren and dry land. Wilderness time is unsettling, yet it's also a time where we come face to face with ourselves and realize our deep need of God. For only God can transform our dry wilderness into a verdant oasis. That oasis is right here, in this sacred place, in this holy gathering. Worship matters because it reminds us of what's most important. It doesn't matter because the institution needs our money, or our volunteer time, or our presence in order to bolster the statistics. It matters because you and I need to be fed with something that will truly satisfy and sustain. The danger of being spiritually malnourished is real, and it's surprising how quickly this can happen.

Yet mainline churches continue to be tempted to offer a kind of worship which is performance-oriented and which takes its cues from popular taste. I don't think this is the way to go. In fact, it strikes me as the ultimate in buying that which does not satisfy—at least in the long run.

*Therefore I have gazed upon you in your holy place, that I might behold your power and your glory.* Although our weekly services may seem repetitive, the genius of Anglican worship is its deep structure. It doesn't depend on the whim of the presider, nor is it meant to entertain. It simply immerses us in stories of God's people throughout many ages and then invites us to take an active part in the ways of God. In the Eucharist we taste the goodness of God. We're given a little bit of the divine life. We're given a taste of love.

And so we keep coming. And little by little we discover that in being here in the company of others, we *do* find deep and soul-satisfying contentment. Sometimes it's the connections we make here that satisfy us. Sometimes it's a phrase in a reading or a verse in a hymn. Sometimes it's bread broken and wine outpoured. And sometimes it's something we can't even put our finger on but which registers powerfully on our souls. *My soul is content, as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips.*

Expensive meals at the Ritz might be delicious, but their satisfaction is fleeting. Here we are satisfied with spiritual food that is eternally nourishing. A closet full of clothes

allows us to change our look frequently, but they soon wear out. Here we put on Christ, the garment which is eternal. We spend so much on things that are second best. Here we are given grace, love, and forgiveness in abundance, proving that the best things in life are, indeed, free.