

# TURNING POINTS

THE CAFOD/ CHRISTIAN AID/ DLT  
LENT BOOK 2007



**Barbara Glasson • Pamela Hussey**  
**Joyce Karuri • Moire O'Sullivan**  
**Kathleen Richardson • Jane Williams**

# TURNING POINTS

Reflections on the  
Scripture Readings for Lent 2007



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# Contents

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<i>About the authors</i>		vii
<b>Introduction</b>	Brendan Walsh	ix
<b>Ash Wednesday to Saturday after Ash Wednesday</b>	Jane Williams	2
<b>First week of Lent</b>	Jane Williams	10
<b>Second week of Lent</b>	Barbara Glasson	24
<b>Third week of Lent</b>	Kathleen Richardson	38
<b>Fourth week of Lent</b>	Joyce Karuri	52
<b>Fifth week of Lent</b>	Pamela Hussey	66
<b>Holy Week and Easter Sunday</b>	Moire O'Sullivan	80
<i>About CAFOD</i>		97
<i>About Christian Aid</i>		99



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## *Introduction*

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What is the point of Lent?

For Christians, it is the time when we try to trim away some of inessentials, and return to and refresh the things that are at the real centre of our lives. What are the things that really matter? What sort of person am I – and what sort of person do I want to be?

So, we try to find a little more time to be still, to wait quietly. We try to let go of some of the less important things. We 'give something up'. We reach out to those in need, and in doing so we discover something of our own brokenness and need to be forgiven.

By making things a little simpler, a little less cluttered, we are able to see more clearly the things that are important. Love, justice, forgiveness, prayer.

But as Jane Williams reminds us in her opening reflection, Jesus insists that being 'religious', and doing 'religious things' are not the point of Lent. If we let them become the point, then we remain stuck in 'religion' and never discover God.

Lent can be a turning point in our life. We reflect on the gospel readings and their message of the sacredness of every human life and the blasphemy of unnecessary poverty and hunger. We live out these truths in our prayer and action. In becoming a person with prayer and the search for justice at the heart of our life we start to know God. And getting to know God is the real point of living in this world.

*Brendan Walsh*



# TURNING POINTS

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# Jane Williams

## Ash Wednesday to Saturday after Ash Wednesday

*Ash Wednesday*

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### **A perfect excuse**

Jl 2:12–18; Ps 51; 2 Co 5:20–6:2; Mt 6:1–6, 16–21

*‘Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them.’ (Matthew 6:1)*

This passage has always been my perfect excuse for keeping my faith to myself. After all, if I go around telling people about it, surely it will be ‘practising my piety before others’? I am more than happy to be the kind of armchair Christian that Jesus seems to approve of here, praying secretly, on my own, behind my own closed door, just God and me. A nice, private religion. Just what most of us have always wanted, especially if we’re British.

Sadly, though, this approach only works if we resolutely ignore the rest of the gospel! This odd-sounding piece of advice comes in the Sermon on the Mount, where it is rather painfully obvious that the followers of Jesus are to be publicly identifiable. They are to be ‘the light of the world’ (Matthew 5:14), and even I can’t persuade myself that that is best done in the comfort of my own home.

One of the underlying themes of the Sermon on the

Mount is about rewards. Starting with the Beatitudes in chapter 5, where certain kinds of behaviour are rewarded with blessing, Jesus is trying to get us to look at our motives. What does religion mean to us? Why do we do what we do? What is the hoped-for outcome? What do we see as the 'reward' of believing in God?

Matthew chapter 6 is a particularly good starting-point for Lent, because it is talking about prayer, almsgiving and fasting, all the things we should be concentrating on in Lent. But Jesus says they are not ends in themselves. Being 'religious' and doing 'religious' things are not the point, Jesus says. If we let them become the point, then we have got out of them all we are going to get. We have got the satisfaction of 'being religious'. But the real point of living in this world is to get to know God, and once we know God, we will long for others to know him too. God is the reward, the only one worth having.

So walking around with ash on your forehead is fine. It's not showing off, just showing God.

### ***Thought for the day***

God is the point of believing in God.

### ***Prayer***

Lord, give me such a hunger for you that I will never be satisfied with anything less. Give me a thirst for your justice that will only be quenched when everyone sits at your table and is fed. Give me a voice that will never be silenced until all your people stand before you together, in awe and joy. Amen.

## **Profit and Loss**

Dt 30:15–end; Ps 1; Lk 9:22–25

*‘What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?’ (Luke 9:25)*

In a nutshell, Lent is about finding yourself by giving things up. So, in a sense, it isn't about discipline, but about self-fulfilment because, paradoxically, most of the things we think of as self-indulgent actually pay no attention to the 'self'. Most things that are marketed as 'treats' or 'pampering yourself' are actually about giving our bodies something either to relax them or stimulate them temporarily. A cup of real coffee, a nice glass of wine, a long soak in a scented bath, all of these things, we tell ourselves, are about giving ourselves a bit of quality time.

I've nothing against such indulgences – in fact, I'm writing this with a cup of coffee and a glass of red wine by my side, and my feet in a bowl of peppermint-scented warm water. But it is worth just mentioning that I am doing for my body what anybody – and I do mean any 'body' – would like. There is nothing particularly individual about this. No voyage of self-discovery is necessary to know that bodies like and even need stimulation and relaxation.

But only a rather more rigorous programme of 'self-fulfilment' will help me find out what my particular self needs in order to be satisfied, as opposed to what any old body likes. And that is part of the journey of Lent. What

is at the heart of our lives? What makes us feel most truly ourselves? What would leave us utterly bereft, if it was taken away?

The Christian answer to that is 'Jesus', but it is easy to say that when there is no danger that it will be put to the test. Jesus assures his disciples that that is the right answer. Only the God who is in Christ, reconciling the world to himself is worth everything. But do we believe that with our lives, as well as with our words? Lent is a time to find out, by giving up some of the props that we think we rely on to make us happy. We may be pleasantly surprised by our real 'self'.

***Thought for the day***

It is possible that by giving up the things I don't need, I may come closer to the God that I do need, and so find myself.

***Prayer***

Lord, you tell us to take up our cross. As we look around your world, we will see that many are struggling under the weight of poverty, injustice and suffering. Give us the courage to help to carry these crosses and as we lighten the load of others, give us the joy of knowing that we are walking with you. Amen.

### **The Food of Love**

Is 58:1–9a; Ps 51:1–5, 17–18; Mt 9:14–15

*“Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?””(Matthew 9:14)*

Jesus’ attitude to food is one of the personal things that comes out from the gospel stories about him. He liked food, and sharing it with friends. He was critical of some of the food regulations of his people, or at least, of the attitude that went with them. He worried about the food needs of the crowds who followed him, and meals marked some of the most significant moments in his ministry, to the point where a meal becomes the characteristic activity of the Christian community.

This is not something that pious followers would have been likely to invent about Jesus, because it was clearly rather embarrassing. Serious religious people are supposed to fast, aren’t they? John the Baptist was well-known for his ascetic life-style, and it added force to his message, because people could see his total commitment. Jesus and his followers, on the other hand, very conspicuously didn’t fast. Jesus turned water into very good wine; he ate with tax-collectors and sinners, to make them feel included; he fed the five thousand. What comes over is the picture of a man who was very good at enjoying himself, and whose followers had fun. It is easy to forget that, as the gospel story moves towards its dreadful climax at the cross.

But what underlies this attitude to food is the temptation that Jesus faced at the beginning of his ministry. After his baptism, when he went out into the desert and fasted, the devil came and tempted him to turn stones into bread. Everything that follows in the gospel stories shows that Jesus could easily have done that, and that he didn't think there was anything wrong with satisfying hunger. But when the devil tempts him, he refuses to make food for himself. 'My food is to do God's will', he says.

What nourishes Jesus is God, his relationship with God, his knowledge that he is loved by God. That's why bread and wine are the best means of demonstrating the love of God. We are showing what feeds us and keeps us alive, and we are making a place of hospitality for all.

***Thought for the day***

God's food is the nourishment that is perfectly designed to sustain us and help us to grow.

***Prayer***

Lord, teach us to trust that you really know what we need to feed us, so that we may grow into the joy that comes from sharing with you and all your people at the table of your kingdom. Amen.

## *Saturday after Ash Wednesday*

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### **Patching it up**

Is 58:9b–end; Ps 86:1–7; Lk 5:27–32

*‘Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax-collectors and others sitting at the table with them’ (Luke 5:29)*

These little throwaway verses in the gospels, where Jesus just goes up to someone and says, ‘Follow me’, and they do, are actually mind-boggling. Whatever must Jesus have been like, to have that effect? His presence must have been extraordinary, and so must his insight into people.

So here is Levi, sitting in his tax-office, surrounded by people who feared and hated him in equal measure, and yet despised him at the same time, because although he had the power to take their money, they had the satisfaction of knowing that he had lowered himself to work for the Roman oppressors, and that made them better than him, in the end.

Jesus takes one look at Levi and sees a man in torment. He entirely agrees with the other people’s opinions about him. He hates and fears and despises himself, too. Two words from Jesus, ‘Follow me’, and Levi is free.

In the next scene, Levi is trying to offer that freedom to others. What better proof is there of how good Jesus’ judgement of people is? Levi isn’t trying to distance himself from his past. Instead, he has invited all his old cronies, the other outcast, wealthy, compromised tax-collectors, to supper, to meet Jesus. He wants them to

have what he has found, the chance to start again.

It is so hard to believe in the possibility of a genuine fresh start. Whenever we think we have really turned a corner, we find we have actually just put a patch over a hole in our lives, but the basic fabric is unchanged. But it is much too frightening to throw the whole thing away and start again. We have to be as desperate as Levi before we can even contemplate such a thing.

Most of the people Jesus met didn't believe they were that desperate. Perhaps we don't think we are either. But the offer is there: don't patch it up, start again. That's Levi's testimony: it really is possible to follow Jesus into a new life.

### ***Thought for the day***

If we keep patching things up, we will end up with something that bears no relation at all to the original.

### ***Prayer***

Lord, I am so used to being ill that I hardly notice the cure you offer. Help me to reach out in trust and take what you are offering so freely and generously. Amen.

# Jane Williams

## First week of Lent

### *First Sunday of Lent*

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#### **Be Yourself**

Dt 26:1–11; Ps 91; Rom 10:8b–13; Lk 4:1–13

*'One does not live by bread alone.'* (Luke 4:4)

I have only ever once been in the desert, and that was in Namibia. I saw the desert from the safety of an air-conditioned car, but even so, it was beautiful and terrifying, in roughly equal proportions. The source of both the beauty and the terror was the sheer alienness of the desert. It is absolutely not a place where human beings are in control. There is a road through the Namib, but the sand often covers it, and the dunes around change their contours as the wind shifts, so it is very hard to know where you are going. The landscape moves and ripples, and earth and sky are indistinguishable on every horizon.

So where better for Jesus to go to test his ministry than a desert? The chapters that follow after today's gospel are going to be driven by Jesus' authority, his certainty, his mission, his unwavering determination. But here in the desert, we see that all of that is based on something else. He comes to the desert, to a place where he is most obviously not in control, to find the force that will drive him. And that force is obedience.

The devil's temptations are very clever. He is only

tempting Jesus to be what he already is. 'Do a miracle, have authority, prove how much God loves you.' In the weeks and months to come, Jesus will do lots of miracles, and people will exclaim at his authority, and God has already told him, at the river of baptism, how much he is loved. So what harm can there possibly be in Jesus responding to these temptations?

But out in the uncontrollable desert, Jesus resists the temptation to be in control, to be the instigator of his own powers, to be the one at the centre of his own universe. 'Only God, only God, only God', he keeps saying to the devil. 'I am what I am because of God, not myself.' That's why this is the beginning of the new creation: because Jesus was prepared to be only what God made him, whereas we are always trying to make God be what we would like him to be.

***Thought for the day***

Fear God and fear nothing else.

***Prayer***

Lord, make us the people we are meant to be but can only be when we come together in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **The human face of the Judge**

Lv 19:1–2, 11–18; Ps 19:7–end; Mt 25:31–end

*‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory’ (Matthew 25:31)*

Someone once gave me a very good piece of advice: if someone close to you makes you angry, remember what it is about them that you love, then tell them off. I have found this helpful over and over again. It doesn’t stop me from being angry, but it means that my anger is likely to be properly directed at a particular offence, rather than spilling out into some global condemnation of the nature, features, voice, habits and very existence of the person who has made me cross.

So today’s gospel story of the sheep and the goats starts with what might be reassurance, because the person who is doing the separating is the Son of Man, someone we know and recognize, who loves us; indeed, loves us so much that he has voluntarily come to live with us and share our lives. Surrounded by angels and sitting on the throne of glory as he is, still it is his beloved and well-known face that we see.

What’s more, we understand his standards of judgment, because they are the same as ours. The judge isn’t suddenly going to reel off a whole list of strange by-laws and sub-clauses that we have apparently contravened, although we never even knew they existed. No, he is going to look at the lives we have shared, as he has

shared ours.

But there the reassurance stops. Because Jesus' understanding of 'sharing' is not ours. We may share our lives with our family and friends, but not with the whole human race. It's all very well for the Son of God to think of 'sharing' in humanity in that all-encompassing way, but that's just not how we ordinary human beings think of it.

And then the human face of the Son of Man becomes the human faces of all those who have died of starvation so that we may have plenty, those whose countries have been ravaged by war so that we don't have to have war in our country, those who have been denied justice because we didn't care enough to challenge their oppressors.

***Thought for the day***

God the Son came to share in our humanity, not just mine.

***Prayer***

Lord, enlarge our vision we pray, so that there is room for all your people. Teach us that while others are diminished, we are too, and bring us trustfully to your judgement seat, hand in hand with all our sisters and brothers. Amen.

**Forgive us our trespasses**

Is 55:10–11; Ps 34; Mt 6:7–15

*'Our Father in heaven'* (Matthew 6:9)

In the theological college where I taught for a number of years, the custom in that international community was for everyone to say the Lord's Prayer in their own language. I liked to shut my eyes and hear the wave of sounds, familiar and unfamiliar, washing over me and out into the world, to find their echoes in every place and every time that Christians meet. It is the Christian family prayer, one of the marks of our belonging, so familiar that it's hard to pay attention to what it is saying.

It is a prayer that has all the characteristics of Jesus' mission. It has the intimacy of his name for God – 'Father', and his willingness to include us in that intimacy. We dare to call God 'Father', although his name is too holy for us even to utter, because God's Son has told us to.

Then it has Jesus' longing for the time when everyone will do the Father's will, as he, the Son, does. After all, what else is God's Kingdom, but the time when his people honour and obey him? But we shall obey God not out of fear of his power, but because this King makes it his daily business to provide for the people. In God's Kingdom, we shall all eat God's bread, as the children of Israel ate the manna in the wilderness. There will be enough for all; more than the poor have ever had though less than the rich thought they needed. Jesus trusts God

to be utterly dependable and radically just.

And then there is forgiveness.

How did the Christian church come to be such a judgmental place, when we only exist because of God's willingness to forgive? When we were still far off, before we even knew what we were looking for, let alone being able to ask God to forgive us, God met us in his Son and brought us home. This is the password, the essential characteristic – we are forgiven, and so we forgive. That's how we show the nature of our God.

### ***Thought for the day***

Do as you would be done by, or as God has done for you.

### ***Prayer***

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver from evil. For yours is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

### **A fishy tale**

Jon 3:1–10; Ps 51; Lk 11:29–32

*‘The queen of the South will rise at the judgement with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!’ (Luke 11:31)*

This chapter in Luke’s gospel is one of escalating tension. Some people have said that Jesus’ power, although it appears to be doing good, actually originates with the evil one. Then some well-meaning women, no doubt trying to pour oil on troubled waters, say, ‘No, no he comes of good stock. Let’s give credit for his powers where it is due – to his mother.’ By the end of the chapter, Jesus is verbally lashing out at the local clergy and the lawyers, and making himself some very dangerous enemies in the process. And into the middle of this swims Jonah. What is he doing in this edgy, angry chapter? Well, I’m afraid he is up to no good. He may be a ‘sign’, but I don’t think he’s a good one.

Jonah is comically famous for being a grumpy and reluctant prophet. Everyone else in the story obeys God – the storm reacts to Jonah’s disobedience; the fish carries Jonah to safety; the people listen and repent, even the bushes grow up to shade him when God tells them to. Only Jonah, God’s chosen prophet, is out of tune with God. He does finally say God’s words, but he doesn’t want people to believe them.

Jonah's great sin is that he really did know God, but he just didn't like him. He wouldn't mind working for a God who was nice to his favourites but harsh and condemning to others. He just can't bear God to be just as prepared to forgive the people of Nineveh as he is to forgive his disobedient prophet.

So when Jesus tells his hearers that they are to take Jonah as their sign, it is not a compliment. On the contrary, he is suggesting that they, like Jonah, have God's words but don't want to share them. The queen of the south, the people of Nineveh, old uncle Tom Cobbley and all will believe in God and obey him before his own people do. Not much has changed since the first century, and the world is still very full of Jonah's. But we're not like that, are we?

### ***Thought for the day***

I don't want to be a Jonah-sign, I want to be a resurrection-sign.

### ***Prayer***

Lord Jesus Christ, help us to share what you have given us, so that we can rejoice with you over all God's children, ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, singing with us the anthem of praise. Amen.

## *First Thursday of Lent*

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### **Say, 'Please'**

Est 4:1–3, 5:12–14; Ps 138; Mt 7:7–12

*'Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you'*

(Matthew 7:7)

Jesus lived his whole life and went to his horrible death in radical trust in the God whom he called 'Father'. One of the things we are doing in Lent is trying to free ourselves from some of the other props in our lives to see how far we trust God ourselves. So we test ourselves by moving just slightly out of our comfort zones. Can we bear it? Is God still there? Very few of us test ourselves far before scuttling back to safety. Monks and martyrs may be called to more, but that is not the common vocation.

So Jesus' simplistic words in today's gospel reading are hard to take seriously. We do not intend to put ourselves in the position where it will matter much whether or not God will really give what we ask, or open when we knock. We will have God's provision for us as the icing on the cake of what we provide for ourselves. After all, we don't want to risk ending up like Jesus, do we? Look where his trust in God got him – crucified.

But all through the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5–7, Jesus is trying to help people see what it might mean to actually believe in God, rather than just to pay lip-service to the idea of God. Supposing this really is God's world. Supposing the only reality is God's reality.

Supposing that all the day to day transactions that are so important to us – emotional transactions, social ones, financial ones, moral ones – are wholly meaningless. Only God is real. Everything else is a mirage. If that is so, then the only sensible thing to do, in fact the only possible thing to do, is to ask, search, knock until what you touch is the reality of God.

This doesn't necessarily mean giving up everything – though it might. But it does mean seeing everything with new eyes. Everything that is not God is transitory. It cannot save us or give us life. Only God is to be relied upon. What he is and gives, lasts.

### ***Thought for the day***

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:21).

### ***Prayer***

Teach us to love everything that you give us, but always to love you more. Teach us to rejoice in possessing and in giving away, in comfort and in hardship, and in all things to look to you, our Lord and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **Counsels of Perfection**

Ez 18:21–28; Ps 130; Mt 5:20–26

*“But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment”*

(Matthew 5:22)

The Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5–7, is enough to make anyone give up. This religion is just too hard. We prefer the Jesus who parties with tax collectors and prostitutes, and sits light to the finer details of the Jewish legal system. At least, we like that Jesus in relation to ourselves, though we don't really mind this stricter Jesus in relation to people who disagree with us. But the trouble is that there is no way of reading today's gospel as primarily a way of regulating how other people behave towards us. It is relentlessly personal, directed at each one of us.

It is salutary to think how much of religious life, how many religious controversies and schisms, are about our fierce desire to correct other people. Showing up others makes us feel self-righteous and reduces the need to examine our own lives. We know we're better than them – whoever 'they' may be.

But this passage is about us, and it is startling. All those little vices and grudges that we really hardly count at all are being laid bare for our examination. Surely God cannot seriously mean that as far as he is concerned, someone who is angry with another person is as bad as a murderer? Surely, thinking that other Christians are com-

plete twits doesn't deserve punishment! This passage even says that the onus is on us if someone else is cross with us. Even if they are the offenders, we have to go and look for them before we can come before God's altar.

What we are seeing here is the way God functions. God does not hate or despise anything he has made. God runs out to meet us and put fine robes on us, even though we have ignored him or used him for most of our lives. We cannot make God be like us, but we can try to make ourselves a little more like God. It's always tempting to start that process by trying to change other people, but Jesus says in this passage that the only starting point is ourself.

### ***Thought for the day***

Strange as it is, God likes my brothers and sisters as much as he likes me. I could try to find out why.

### ***Prayer***

Spirit of God, teach us to love and forgive, not out of fear but out of longing for you. Teach us to study Jesus, to make him our model, even though we fail. Teach us to dislike our own faults but to look only for the good in others, and bring us at last into the likeness of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## *First Saturday of Lent*

---

### **Wholly Holy**

Dt 26:16–19; Ps 119:1–8; Mt 5:43–48

*‘Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5:48)*

So now, this Lent, we have to be perfect. How likely is that? It’s the kind of statement that gives us the perfect excuse not even to try. What is the point, since we have no hope of achieving perfection?

Taken out of context, the instruction is daunting indeed, and it doesn’t actually get much easier when seen in context, where it is talking about how the behaviour of Jesus’ followers must exceed the normal requirements of decent society. Anybody can love people who are kind to them, but Christians have to love everyone. And we are not allowed to turn ‘love’ into a vague and insubstantial concept, because the whole of the Sermon on the Mount tells us exactly what love means, in practical and terrifying detail.

But these verses are the clue, the vital insight into God’s understanding of love and perfection, and so, presumably, of God’s notion of holiness. God treats everyone the same. God doesn’t have favourites. The goodness of God, his life-giving gifts and his presence, are available for all, not just for believers. His sun shines on all that God has created, because all that is created has come into being through his Son.

And that is the ‘perfection’ that we are to aim for. We are trying to learn to see each other and the world with

God's eyes, and this is the first and hardest thing that we have to get to grips with. We are called to see ourselves whole, as God sees us, and our wholeness is a collective thing. None of us can be whole on our own, because that is not how we are designed. We are designed to fit together, not to break up into little fragmentary individuals or like-minded groups.

Holiness, wholeness and perfection are related concepts in much of the Bible. The Church, like the people of Israel, is called to demonstrate, in our life together, God's perfect, holy vision of wholeness. That doesn't make it an easy Lent task, but at least it reminds us where our focus must be – not on ourselves, but on our common life.

***Thought for the day***

Salvation is for sharing.

***Prayer***

Lord, we pray for your Church throughout the world, that our life together may reflect your loving wholeness. Teach us to grieve at division, and to work for a communion that will give us a foretaste of your own perfect unity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

# Barbara Glasson

## Second Week of Lent

### *Second Sunday of Lent*

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#### **Look up**

Gn 15:5–12, 17–18; Ps 27; Ph 3:17–4:1; Lk 9:28–36

*He brought Abram outside and said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. So many will your descendants be.'* (Genesis 15:5)

Our hosts took us to the top of a local hill. It was dusk and we were very new to India. As our eyes adjusted to the quickly fading light, the group of Indian young people coaxed us to gaze towards the crimson orb of the setting sun. Huge and fiery it sank swiftly beyond the horizon. From the tin roofs of sprawling and ramshackle dwellings in the valley beneath us the last rays of the sun glistened. 'Look, look at the sun' cajoled our proud hosts. 'How many people live down there?' asked one of my UK companions. Should we look up or down?

In Liverpool, which is my home, the city seemingly contradicts starlight with its own orange glow. We are rarely able to gaze at the firmament, dumbfounded at its vastness. I wonder if this is why experiences of the 'other' or 'the infinite' in our society are often sought by artificial means?

Abram of course, that ancient tent dweller, had no such dilemma, the moonscape and star shine of the worlds beyond worlds, constellations, nova and nebula,

of seemingly endless scope, stretched him, and those ancient nomads, to the limits of their imagination and to the God who promised to relate to them. So, into Sarah and Abram's childless despair God speaks, 'Look Abram, look at the stars ...'

Look up.

After the transfiguration even the disciples had to descend from the mountain top and look down into the faces of the demanding crowd. But moments to look up at the stars, at the glories of a setting sun, to fill our minds with wonder are important reminders of the covenant connection between heaven and world. How else will we be able to come down to this struggling earth recognising the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living?

### ***Thought for the day***

God of the heavens, help us to reflect upon the stars so that, when darkness crowds our vision, we will still recognise the lustre of your promise in the eyes of the people.

### ***Prayer***

You, who has embodied for us  
a connection between heaven and earth,  
be incarnate in our messy lives.

Wink your delight at us  
from the deep sparkle in the eyes  
of unlikely companions.

Lift our chins from our worries  
and point out afresh  
that the infinite embrace  
of your love  
is already sketched into  
the universe.

## *Second Monday of Lent*

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### **You can't see the elephant**

Dan 9:4–10; Ps 79; Lk 6:36–38

*'Do not judge, and you will not be judged, do not condemn and you will not be condemned.'* (Luke 6:37)

I am sitting on an elephant. We have taken it in turns to climb up the back end of the kneeling Raja by virtue of holding onto his tail. Rickshaws, cows, motorbikes, cars, lorries, bicycles, pigs, women with babies wrapped within vivid saris, street children, all make allowance for our meandering progress, swerving to left and right.

From up here, I have the notion I could sort out this seemingly anarchic traffic – lights here, a policeman there. And why stop at traffic, what about the caste system, the birth rate and health care for the poorest? There is so much about being in India that has put me in touch with my inner fascist. When on an elephant, the one thing you can't see is the elephant.

Later we drive past the new call centres where our young hosts work night shifts for high wages. This need to telephone Europe and the US during our working days has profound implications for their Indian families. We pass McDonald's and a cinema showing *The Incredibles* and later the barracks which once housed the British Army. Globalisation, tourism, the balance between the rural and urban economies, colonialism, consumerism ... these are some of our Western elephants. We can say, with Daniel, 'The shame now, as ever, belongs to us.'

Psalm 79 may help us pivot from despair to hope when the writer, also struggling with his personal and national failure, pleads with God, 'Do not remember against us the guilt of past generations; rather let your compassion come swiftly to meet us ....' The struggles of India may remind us of our collusion in multiple oppressions. But, if we are prepared to dismount from cultural certainties we might also recollect that God still takes the initiative on compassion.

Luke's ongoing challenge is both our caution and our salvation. 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged, do not condemn and you will not be condemned.'

### ***Thought for the day***

Help us to possess the clear vision that comes not so much from riding high but from walking at street level with open eyes.

### ***Prayer***

Monday morning God,  
who sees the week ahead  
with the clarity of timeless wisdom,  
help us to climb down  
from our assumed superiorities  
of culture, education or money.  
Lead us to contrition  
as we realise  
we have ridden our faith on the back of  
too many conceits.  
Give us courage to  
live this week  
without pretence.

### **Standing in the gap**

Is 1:10, 16–20; Ps 51; Mt 23:1–12

*‘Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.’ (Matthew 23:12)*

Often it is the simplest things that are the most moving. In the Aga Khan’s palace, as we meander through the cool arches and whitewashed courtyards, we discover a cabinet containing Gandhi’s staff and shoes. Gandhi suffered house-arrest and the death of his wife here. Amongst the gently irrigated lawns we almost stumble upon a low white stone that marks his modest shrine. The place is full of deep, uncluttered respect.

Jesus teaches his followers, ‘Whoever exalts himself will be humbled – who ever humbles himself will be exalted’, but humility and the pursuit of justice do not sit easily with our western lifestyles. Post-modern people are driven by the concepts of progress and individualism. We are much more likely to ‘Make up heavy loads and pile them on the shoulders of others’ – which in my native Scouse would be translated ‘Do each others’ heads in’.

In the first chapter of Isaiah people are called to the pursuit of justice, upholding the rights of the widow, the fatherless and the oppressed. The author challenges the powerful to relate in a different way.

In the Indian Methodist Church’s leaflet on evangelism the question is asked, ‘Who will stand in the gap?’ Standing in the gap between the oppressed and the

oppressor calls us to put our bodies where our beliefs are – as Gandhi did. And as Jesus shows us, this is not just a comfortable ‘option for the poor’ but a radical reversal of human self-understanding.

Respect for Gandhi comes from seeing his integrity as he ‘stood in the gap’. This is not superficial lip service to the notion of peace; as the psalmist reminds us, God desires the deepest faithfulness of our inmost being.

Standing in solidarity with the poor is a call to all people of faith. We are called to recognise that all humanity lives under the judgement and within the loving gaze of the same God. Standing in the gap, honouring the poor and challenging the ambitions of the powerful is a place of integrity – and it could cost us our lives.

### ***Thought for the day***

The way of the crucified Jesus calls us to put our bodies where our faith is.

### ***Prayer***

God of the pathway  
be as close to me  
as the shoes on my feet.  
Mark my soles  
with love for the poorest.  
Bend my steps, lead me to less,  
be my resolve  
to journey extra miles  
on this holy foot slog  
for justice.

### **An encounter with fear**

Jer 18:18–20; Ps 31; Mt 20:17–28

*‘Is good to be repaid with evil, that they have dug a pit for me?’ (Jeremiah 18:20)*

Some things are so terrifying that we lose the ability to be afraid. We entered such a collective moment when our minibus driver, who had speedily negotiated the mud tracks leading away from the village orphanage, decided to take a right turn onto the motorway. That is the wrong way up the dual carriageway. Apparently it was the quickest route to the petrol station.

‘Oh God,’ Emma seemed to be inhaling the words, ‘we’re all going to die.’

We dodged lorries, motorbikes and speeding cars that hooted wildly, swerving round us to left and right. What seemed like hours later, but in reality was probably only ten minutes, we stumbled out onto the dusty forecourt, rubbing our faces with sweaty hands and laughing uncontrollably.

Such a momentary encounter with our own mortality is a salutary reminder that for some this ‘land of fear’ is a daily reality. One member of my church community in Liverpool lives in a local wheelie bin to avoid kickings from passers-by or the arrest of police patrols exercising their ‘zero tolerance’ imperative. And in the Indian village we had just visited the orphanage marked a desperate response to the pressures of population and globalisation from within this isolated rural community.

Centuries before, Jeremiah questioned God: 'Is good to be repaid with evil, that they have dug a pit for me?' Political plots and personal circumstances have colluded to make fear such a daily reality for some in every generation. Survival may seem the most for which we can hope. Each day is a waking into new dilemmas, a fresh search for food or sanctuary or the relentless search to feed addictions.

In the conversation we overhear between Jesus, James and John in today's reading, we encounter the non-exemption clause in the gospels. Can you walk this path, drink this cup, be a servant? This is not a 'Be a Christian and get the best seats in heaven' agenda. It is the stark invitation to live without our religious security blankets. To drink the cup is to face our own death in the company of a saviour who is not saving himself.

### ***Thought for the day***

Loving Lord, make us conspirators of goodness.

### ***Prayer***

Because of the uprush of terrors  
because of the litanies of grief  
because of the excesses of tyranny  
because of the intimacy of desolations  
because of the derelictions of truth.  
Stretch out your arms to us  
Jesus, stretch out your arms to us.  
Because we are only human  
because we are only just human.

## *Second Thursday of Lent*

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### **Wake up!**

Jer 17:5–10, Ps 1; Lk 16:19–31

*'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets they will pay no heed even if someone should rise from the dead' (Luke 16:31)*

The old men sit under the Tamarind tree. It is midday and heady with sunshine and the smell of spices. Poorly nourished babies are sleeping under the corrugated iron roof and the women are rocking them gently with one foot. Inside we stretch ourselves out under our mosquito nets. We rummage through our rucksacks and pull out our hidden supplies of throat sweets and muesli bars. We are glad to be away from the city's pollution – the fumes that clog our throats with black phlegm. We long to gulp cold clean water from our home kitchen taps.

The season of Lent ticks away minute by minute. Easter approaches. The world sleeps in apathy letting the waters of ecological disaster lap gently at its doorstep. We slumber through the imperative to see who sits in poverty at our gate. Where is God? Does he also snore like some absentee landlord sitting back on the haunches of creation? What will it take to convince us of the need to wake up to a new way of relating to the earth and the people of the earth?

Jesus the prophet, as Jeremiah before him, is an alarm clock for his people. 'Wake up and pay attention' he challenges. We need not be overwhelmed by wickedness. We can put our confidence in the God of heaven who is

amongst the poorest. We can all be blessed like the tree under which the old men slumber but we need to share these riches. Then in exasperation he says, 'If they do not listen to Moses and all the prophets they will pay no heed even if someone should rise from the dead.'

The story of Lazarus is a jolt to open our eyes. Our earth and the people of the earth are under environmental judgment. We have slumbered under the nets of our own complacency for too long. The people are parched by our greed. What will convince us to change our ways? Even a man rising from the dead has not woken us. Wake up! Already the shadows are lengthening – imagine, soon even God could be hanging thirstily on a dead tree.

### ***Thought for the day***

Bring us to our senses, Lord, make us conscious of the needs of each other and of the earth.

### ***Prayer***

Take one hungry family  
put into a tin hut  
with some mixed messages  
add only sufficient water to soak.  
Leave to stand in a hot place  
without stirring anyone to help.  
Beat well.  
Cover with anger  
and a dusting of confusion.  
Help us, sustainer God  
to scrap this recipe for disaster.  
Be content with simpler provision  
and serve immediately.

## *Second Friday of Lent*

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### **An investment in the unlikely**

Gen 37:3–4, 12–13, 17–28; Ps 105; Mt 21:33–43, 45–46

*‘The stone which the builders rejected has become the main cornerstone.’ (Matthew 21:42)*

The taking of malaria tablets soon became a communal routine. Seven little pills through the week were soon washed down with the hot sweet tea. But on Mondays a huge bitter additional pill had to be faced. It was prone to hit the stomach and make an immediate return. The easiest way was to take it at bedtime and then lie flat. One consequence was that it produced such alarming dreams that the beginning of the week soon became known as ‘Manic Monday’.

Joseph was a dreamer. Hidden meanings were revealed to him as he slept or day dreamed over the sheep. His imagination brought him stories that were interpreted as a gift from God. But dreams are not always idyllic. They got Joseph into a cycle of jealousy with his brothers and eventually into exile. Dreams may bring unexpected joys or prophetic words but sometimes in our sleep our fears surface. They can get played out with alarming intensity and leave us feeling unsettled and fearful.

God does not just operate on the surface of human reality. He encounters us at every level, in waking, sleeping and the holding place in between, in the real face of a passer by or in the unravelling of our assumptions, in the need to share our bread or the transfiguration of

dominant paradigms. With God our lives can no longer be viewed from the sole perspective of self. That's why the idea of the stone the builder rejected becoming the cornerstone should not be a total surprise. God has a habit of turning our assumptions on their heads.

The good news is that, in the company of this covenant God, although we might be led to face our worst nightmares we are also continually surprised by split seconds of grace. We are blessed by being treated more justly than we deserve – and called to imagine how that can be for others in the unlikely risk taking of love.

Like Joseph, in our dreams we might face the abyss of our worst fears but also the euphoria of envisioning God's investment in the unlikely.

### ***Thought for the day***

If you think God has a limited imagination – dream on.

### ***Prayer***

Liminal Lord

who wanders on shorelines and challenges power  
who touches the contagious and chides the seas  
who draws lines in the sand and walks on the water  
who honours the criminal and invests in the ill at ease,  
help us not to cower on the edge of confusions  
but imagine wider landscapes of love.

## *Second Saturday of Lent*

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### **The father who waits for us**

Mic 7:14–15, 18–20; Ps 103:1–4, 9–12; Lk 15:1–3, 11–32

*‘But while he was still a long way off his father saw him, and his heart went out to him.’ (Luke 15:20)*

The noise is both familiar and odd. It is the sound of a rock band practicing in a garage. It is a sound of home! But I am still in India, having a final walk round the dusty streets and passing a patch of wasteland where a pack of dogs sleeps through the hot nights. I am no longer surprised that there is a black hog scavenging in the skip. I have got the hang of ‘being in a different world’. The rock group brings the realisation that this is the same world. And I want to go home.

At the airport there is a cow on the runway. The huge jet taxis carefully. We are soon high above Mumbai, where the tin roofs of the slums and the glass of the high rises glint their collective goodbyes.

What does the father see when the son returns? The father who has waited and watched the horizon, who has given his inheritance early, knowing it would lead to no good. What does he see as he raises the young man’s bowed head, to look into the eyes of the one he has borne yet whom suffering has changed? Luke tells us, ‘While he was still a long way off the father saw him and his heart went out to him.’

When we come home, whoever we are, home is never quite the same place that we left. We are reliant on those who have not shared the travelling to be patient with us

as we try to describe the places they will never know.

The psalmist reminds us of God's patience with us in our homecomings: 'As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him, he remembers how we are made, he remembers that we are but dust.'

Lent reminds us how God waits for us – waits in the struggling and the dereliction of words, waits in the span of the world, waits in the nonsense and mess. How our Maker scans the horizon, longs for us to appear again, small, vulnerable, dishevelled, but loved to death.

### ***Thought for the day***

God has an infinite capacity to wait for us.

### ***Prayer***

As the shepherd searching for a lamb  
as the woman hunting for a coin  
as the seeker digging for a pearl  
as the scholar hunting for the truth  
as the struggling looking for respite  
as the hungry reaching out  
so you call us home, dear Lord.  
As a mother to her breast  
as a father for his son.