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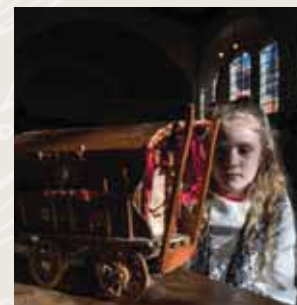
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Cover photo: Kate Bottley © John Mannell; Cover photo: © Sally McAllister and p5 Gen Verde www.genverde.it; pp 1, 26, 27 © Mazur/cbcew.org.uk; P6 Sr Leonella Sgorbati CM - catholicsaints.info/blessed-leonella-sgorbati and Sr Dorothy Stang SND - courtesy of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur; p7 Redemptorist Publications are grateful to the Redemptorist General Council in Rome for permission to use the official photo of the restored icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour in the church of St Alphonsus, Via Merulana 26, Rome.

JESUS CARRIES HIS CROSS

During Lent we remember, in a special way, the way in which Jesus accepted and carried his cross. Perhaps this has a new resonance in our own lives at present.

Fr Denis McBride C.Ss.R. reflects...

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

Mark 8:34-36

You accepted the cross, dear Lord, long before it was laid on your shoulders, didn't you? To you it came not as surprise but as destiny. You sensed that this instrument of torture would somehow not only test you but define you. Not long into your ministry you seemed sure that you would have to pay a price for who you are, the awkward people you loved in your spendthrift way, the authorities you castigated and the values you cherished. And the price would be high – yourself.

At the beginning of your ministry it looked possible that the authorities would violently dismiss you; then as your mission developed it looked highly likely; now, of course, it is inevitable. You knew you would have to suffer for the choices you made and you shared that quite openly with your disciples: that your kind of love would make its way with a cross on its back.

I must say I sympathise with Simon Peter when he took you aside that day in Caesarea Philippi to admonish you for all this distressing talk of suffering. To me he sounds like a reasonable road manager giving advice to the principal performer, worrying that people would be confused if that particular speech were ever to be repeated. He must have thought: it is hardly an enticement to follow the master when he reveals that his destination is the killing fields outside Jerusalem. Who is going to leave the security of home and family to follow your forecast of sure turbulence ahead?

And, of course, events would prove Peter right on that score: none of them did follow you to the killing fields, did they?

I admire you for many things, dear Lord, but this especially: what people rarely mention in ordinary

conversation is the cost of things – not materially, I mean, but the physical and mental and spiritual heartache and grief that can follow from the choices we all make as we struggle to find a purpose and direction in our lives.

You decided to bring to the fore in conversation what most people choose to hide: that suffering is part of everyday life and every relationship, and if people never mention it, they are kidding you.

You have, if I may say so, this annoying habit of attending to what we all want to wish away. For you, suffering is part of everyone's agenda, which is why you challenged all of us to take up our own cross and follow you.

Did you know, dear Lord, that you would bear not only a wooden cross on your shoulders but a world of fatigue and misery and iniquity on your back? You take it all on personally as you criticised your opponents for doing the opposite:

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

Matthew 23:4

You know that some authorities have a compulsion to diminish their subjects; they are experts in restricting people's modest freedom to move with dignity and purpose, by imposing needless burdens on them. Not all, but some authorities are sadistic by nature, taking delight in how their fitful demands are unreachable, save for by a few perfectionists. And then, when these authorities are approached with pleas for mercy, they turn away and shrug, as if failure and vulnerability are foreign to their very nature. As the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh observed: "Their hands push closed the doors that God holds open."

By comparison you proclaimed one of the most beautiful messages I have ever heard:

"The Lord asks us from his cross to rediscover the life that awaits us, to look toward those who look to us, to strengthen, recognise and foster the grace that lives within us. Let us not quench the wavering flame that never falters and let us allow hope to be rekindled."

Pope Francis

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Matthew 11:28

Beloved Lord, what have we done to your yoke, the one you assured us was easy to shoulder? What have we done to your burden, the one you assured us was light?

This article is taken from Stations of the Cross: then and now. Fr Denis McBride's many other CDs, DVDs and books are available from Redemptorist Publications, www.rpbooks.co.uk



FILM REVIEW



A film for Lent: *The Way* (2010)

Starring: Martin Sheen, Deborah Kara Unger *et al.*
Directed by: Emilio Estevez

This film is eleven years old, but as relevant today as when it was first released.

Unlikely pilgrims meet on their way to the tomb of St James at Compostela. Tom Avery (Martin Sheen), a New York dentist, carries the ashes of his son (Emilio Estevez), who died on his first day of the Camino. "Joost from Amsterdam" (Yorick van Wageningen) is an overweight, cheery drug supplier who says he wants to lose weight. Sarah (Deborah Kara Unger), a bitter, angry Canadian, is apparently walking to give up smoking – but actually had an abusive husband and an abortion which she regrets. Jack (James Nesbitt) is an Irish travel writer experiencing writer's block... and there's yourself, because you will quickly become a pilgrim travelling with them.

As they gradually change over the course of their Camino, so will you find yourself learning, asking questions and perhaps also making alterations in your personal life. You will be with the four as they grumble, laugh, think, cry and meet with other pilgrims. You will also see the "real" person beneath their exterior. Perhaps you might also glimpse yourself as God sees you: beautiful, vulnerable, hope-filled, questioning...

This is a film which can be watched again and again because something special emerges at every viewing. It will leave you thinking.

Editorial note: I've seen The Way six times so far and will definitely be watching it again.
Sr Janet



TRAVELLING IN HOPE TOWARDS PEACE

Sally McAllister grew up in Belfast during “the Troubles” and, through the Focolare, learned that forgiveness makes changes and builds peace.

Growing up in the New Lodge Road, North Belfast during “the Troubles”, I watched rioters stone and petrol-bomb the army, and the army respond with water cannons, and baton rounds of tear gas and plastic bullets.

Having witnessed injustice and cruelty from all sides, at the age of 17, I decided that, if I was authentic as a young person, I couldn't just sit on the fence condemning the violence around me – I had to do something to find a solution to Northern Ireland's problems.

But I honestly didn't feel as if I had many options. I had already given up on politics based on sectarianism and merely praying for peace seemed a cop-out.

Around that time there was an Anglican nun living in Ardoyne called Sr Anna. She had left her convent in Oxford to come to Northern Ireland to do cross-community work. She knew the Focolare spirituality and when she heard the young people were organising a big music festival in Loppiano (a small town of the Focolare movement) she contacted twelve large secondary schools and asked them each to send a representative. And so off we set – three Methodists, three Baptists, three Presbyterians and three Catholics. The atmosphere among us wasn't difficult but it was quite superficial – we had to keep it light in order not to stray into something which potentially could quickly become very divisive.

The law of Loppiano is mutual love and it had an incredible impact on us. In the two weeks we spent there, I saw the invisible but very real barriers among the group melt away. Certainly, seeing people from different races and religions united, gave me the

strength to change my life and to want to begin to make a difference to the situation around me.

I realised that the solution to Northern Ireland's problems began with me.

My first experiences were at home – building new relationships with my family, at school or every time I came across a foot patrol of soldiers, remembering that the measure of my love for God was how I treated them.

The real turning point for me came shortly after I returned from buying milk, thereby crossing the peace-line into another area. From inside the shop I noticed a big gang of young men hanging around outside, waiting for me – I couldn't believe it! I had changed but Belfast hadn't. They beat me very badly. As they slammed a brick into the base of my spine, I thought, if you believe in what you saw in Loppiano, now is the moment to put it into practice. Forgiveness starts here.

On another occasion I was stopped by a foot patrol of soldiers and taken in for questioning following a massive local explosion. I was absolutely terrified as I was taken to the army barracks in an armoured car at gunpoint. At one point I thought: what would the people from the Focolare say and do in a situation like this? They would say that the only thing that will remain of this moment is how much you try to love. So I talked to the soldiers – treated them as human beings, loved by God as he loved me – and I realised they were probably just as frightened as I was. I was held for several hours and then released. Walking home at about 3 a.m., I felt a tremendous sense of peace: I had taken on board a lifestyle I couldn't reject.

Now, based in Loppiano, I work and tour with Gen Verde, one of the Focolare's international performing arts groups.

A very important part of our current work is a workshop programme for young people called “Start Now”. Its strapline is “Dialogue, peace, unity... It begins with me”. The project began several years ago in the Holy Land with mixed groups of young Christians, Muslims



and Jews and has proved effective in countries across the world with young people from very diverse social backgrounds, races and religions. It presents ideas, but also an opportunity to put these values into practice. The young people see the results and recognise that this experience can continue in their everyday lives.

I recently spent time in Belfast and realised that the experience of the Troubles is still raw for some people. Great things have happened and I saw the impressive regeneration of areas which were very run-down when I lived there.

Other areas are still deeply affected by sectarianism and the ghosts of the past. That sort of regeneration requires something deeper if we are to win the minds and hearts of future generations, and give them hope that things can be different: to realise that they themselves can make a difference.

As an 18-year-old I thought my life was over and nothing would ever change. Focolare spirituality showed me that there was a way...

At that time someone told me that every time you do an act of love, every time you forgive and start again, you are putting a brick in the foundations of the peace that will one day come to Northern Ireland. I believed it then. I believe it still.

Sally McAllister is a member of the Focolare Movement (<https://www.focolare.org/en>) and the Tour Director of Gen Verde (<https://www.genverde.it/index>). This article is taken from a talk she gave in Belfast to an international gathering of Bishop Friends of the Focolare Movement.

A canticle of love



*Nothing is more practical than finding God,
than falling in Love in a quite absolute, final way.*

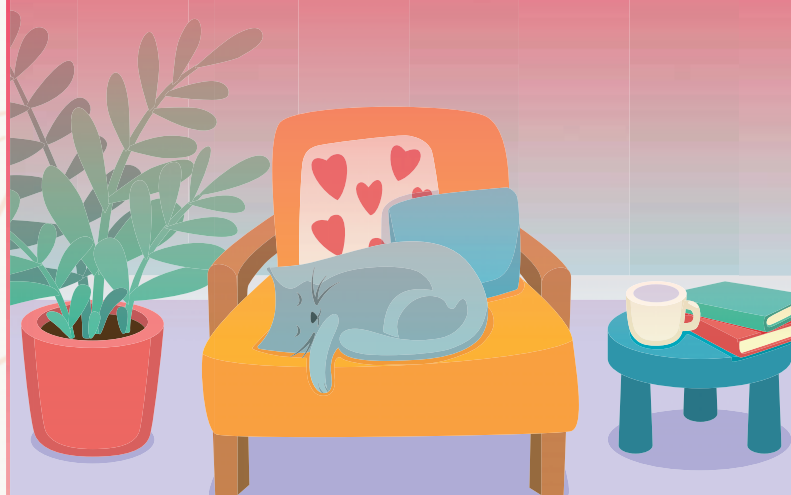
What you are in love with,
what seizes your imagination,
will affect everything.

It will decide

what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you do with your evenings,
how you spend your weekends,
what you read, whom you know,
what breaks your heart,
and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.

Fall in Love, stay in love,
and it will decide everything.

Pedro Arrupe SJ



"I CHOOSE TO LOVE"

"Love is our reason for living." Sr Janet Fearn FMDM reminds us of two people whose love, like that of Jesus, led to their deaths on behalf of others.



Sr Dorothy Stang SND



Sr Leonella Sgorbati CM

You are training student nurses. When you climbed out of bed in the morning, you did not stop to think that, by evening, you would be a martyr. Instead, you headed to the school of nursing, reasonably expecting your day to be surrounded by familiar people and familiar routines.

On the outskirts of the Somali capital, Mogadishu, on 17 September 2006, Al Qaeda-linked Islamists murdered an Italian Consolata Missionary sister. They killed 66-year-old Sister Leonella Sgorbati and a security guard, Mohamed Osman Mahamud, as they crossed the road between the school of nursing, which she had established, and the village in which the convent was located.

In the midst of increasing violence in Somalia and only six months before she died, Italian television interviewed Sr Leonella. She declared, "I know there is a bullet with my name on it. I don't know when it will arrive, but as long as it does not arrive, I will stay [in Somalia]." She later remarked,

"I cannot be afraid and at the same time love. I choose to love."

On the day they died, Sr Leonella and Mohamed were heading home from the Nursing Training Centre when gunmen fired on them, instantly killing the security guard. Sr Leonella, shot in the back and critically injured, was rushed into the hospital. In agony, she could say only one thing, "I forgive. I forgive." ("Perdono. Perdono.") These were also her last words.

Nineteen months before Sr Leonella's death, on 12 February 2005, hired assassins killed 73-year-old Sr Dorothy Stang, a sister of Notre Dame and a

missionary to the landless peasants of Brazil, as she walked through the Amazonian rainforest on her way to a meeting in the village of Esperanza ("Hope"). Known as the "Angel of the Amazon" because of her wholehearted devotion to the poor, she had received death threats but remained undeterred in her struggle for justice. She herself declared, "I don't want to flee, nor do I want to abandon the battle of these farmers who live without any protection in the forest. They have the sacrosanct right to aspire to a better life on land where they can live and work with dignity while respecting the environment." Asked why she carried on fighting, the future martyr responded, "There are things you do because they feel right and they make no sense and they make no money and it may be the real reason we are here: to love each other (and to eat each other's cooking) and to say it was good!"

On 12 February 2005, two gunmen, hired by a local wealthy landowner, blocked Sr Dorothy's path and asked if she had any weapons. "This is my only weapon," she replied, showing them her Bible. She read them a passage from the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." They responded by shooting her six times, leaving her body sprawled on the path where she fell.

Sr Dorothy was posthumously awarded the 2008 United Nations Human Rights Prize. In the same year, the Sr Dorothy Stang Center for Social Justice and Community Engagement was established at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, California.

Sr Leonella was beatified on 26 May 2018 at the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta e Santa Giustina in Piacenza, Italy, by Cardinal Angelo Amato.

Sr Janet Fearn is a Franciscan Missionary of the Divine Motherhood.

PERPETUAL HEROES

Katie Knight suggests that in the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, when looking at Jesus and Mary, we are looking at perpetual heroes.

Six years old, terrified of thunderstorms and, dangerously, hiding in a wardrobe, my mother forced me to stand at the bedroom window. She held me tightly whilst we watched the lightning together – and ever since then, I have loved the noise and brilliance of a thunderstorm. You can probably think of similar situations.

More recently, travelling by plane, a scared toddler wailed and clung to his mother, unable to understand what was happening to his ears as the plane descended towards the runway and the atmospheric pressure changed.

There is nothing extraordinary about a child clinging to a parent for comfort and reassurance in a frightening situation. We've all done it.

Take a look at the familiar icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. The young Jesus sees two angels carrying the instruments of his future passion and death. Afraid, he holds tightly to Mary's hand. In his fear, his sandal comes undone and hangs from his right foot, ready to fall.

Why, in the icon, does Mary look, not at her son, but at us?

We are familiar with media photos of parents fleeing from conflict, carrying a small child, searching for safety, trying to avoid the next possible source of danger. A time of extreme anxiety is not the moment to gaze lovingly into the child's eyes as if nothing else mattered.

Of course, where there is no danger, the adult remains calm and unafraid, takes charge and responds to a



child's distress. Yet, even where both lives are threatened, many little ones will sleep soundly in the arms of a petrified parent, trusting that love will keep them both safe.

So why are Jesus and Mary so peaceful in this icon? Jesus appears more curious than terrified at the vision of his future suffering.

An icon proclaims spiritual, not physical, truths. Perhaps Mary looks towards us, pleading on Jesus' behalf. The calmness of mother and son might also encourage us to rise above our fear and anxiety – and to trust.

Courage and fear walk hand-in-hand. Those who are unafraid are not brave. The hero is probably also terrified but does what is right in spite of feeling petrified.

We had an amazing example of heroism during the terrorist attack on Westminster Bridge in June 2017. PC Keith Palmer, an unarmed police officer, was stabbed as he tried to stop a knife-wielding killer from entering the Houses of Parliament. Of course he was scared. Of course he knew he risked his life – but he placed the safety of others before his own and died in the process. He was brave. He was truly a hero.

The icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help shows a mother and child who place our peace and security before their own.

It could perhaps be renamed "Perpetual heroes".

Katie Knight is a mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and a former midwife.

A short prayer to Our Lady of Perpetual Help

O Mother of Perpetual Help, sweetest Mary,
I ask you, with your motherly grace, to watch over me.
Give me the strength to take one day at a time. Amen.



TRAVELLING WITH THE "POPE OF HOPE"

Linda Bordoni, a former ballet dancer, has worked as a Vatican Radio journalist for more than 25 years and, in that time, has accompanied three popes on their travels. She reflects on some very special journeys with Pope Francis.



*The "Lampedusa cross",
made with wood from
wrecked migrant boats*

It was the summer of 2017 when rumours of a possible papal visit to Colombia were promptly quashed in the usual Vatican circles. An unwritten rule decrees that the Pope never travels to a country where a presidential electoral campaign is underway to avoid any political exploitation. But on this occasion, hope trumped protocol: the war-torn country had just embarked on a difficult path to peace after the signing of a deal between the president and the FARC, Colombia's largest insurgent group. That's when Vatican Radio asked me to travel to Bogotá with Pope Francis to cover his six-day apostolic visit. He was visiting the nation to affirm the faith, but he clearly wanted to assure Colombians that after decades of death, destruction and division there was hope in sight for all, and he was there to support them. The people turned out in droves to welcome him. Everyone wore white, the colour of peace. His speeches and homilies were all woven with the silver thread of the theme of hope.

Over more than a quarter of a century working as a journalist, to help bring the Pope's message of Christian hope to every corner of the world, I have had the privilege of witnessing Francis in action in the most disparate contexts and situations. From the joy of slum-dwellers, as far apart as Nairobi and Asunción, to the "opulent" welcome of the sheiks in Abu Dhabi

where, together with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, he signed the *Document on Human Fraternity*, telling us to take action now if we hope for a world in which our children's children may even dare think of a future.

Then there was that intense, half-day visit to Strasbourg, when he solemnly urged the over 700 members of the European Parliament to keep hope alive in an increasingly barren continent...

But for me, the most poignant journey of hope was his very first venture outside Rome, to the Italian island of Lampedusa. He went there to honour the multitude of hopeful men, women and children who die crossing the Mediterranean in their quest for a better life. "I don't like travelling," the Pope told one of the journalists after that incredible day; but witnessing the effects that journey had on those present subsequently compelled him, he revealed, to embark on travels around the world "to visit churches and people" and "encourage the seeds of hope they all have within".

Every papal journey is an exhausting and exhilarating affair: you never stop working, capturing words and emotions as you do your best to tell the world what is going on. Only when it is over, do you realise, just like everyone else out there, thronging the streets, the churches, the meeting places, the sports stadiums and auditoriums, that you too have changed a little, thanks to those "seeds of hope" sown by the Pope in every step he takes.

**Linda Bordoni works for the
English Programme of Vatican Radio.**

MOVING ON IN HOPE

Lent is about moving towards Easter. Tessa Sheaf reminds us that it is not a time to stand still, but to look forward in hope.

As we enter what the Church describes as “this joyful season of Lent” we may find ourselves still struggling with aspects of the coronavirus pandemic that have left us painfully bereaved with loss of income or recovering from ruptured relationships. Dare we hope in the reality of the resurrection when we find ourselves overwhelmed by painful memories?

As we reflect over the past year, where do we become aware of God’s mysterious presence in our lives since Lent 2020? Stories have abounded in the media of courageous and generous outreach to the poor, sick and bereaved throughout the world in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Neighbourhoods showed unprecedented support to the housebound and those in need. These are surely signs of God’s presence with us in the midst of turmoil. They provide us with reason for hope. God is truly Emmanuel, God with us. If we reflect on our personal experiences over the past year, do we find similar signs of God having accompanied us in the midst of turmoil? Did we encounter any gestures of goodwill and solidarity that helped us continue with another day of lockdown and uncertainty? Maybe we sometimes found ourselves able to be agents of healing for others. Perhaps we could thank God for these manifestations of God’s love for us and rejoice in his constant presence with us in all our joys and sorrows. This sustains our hope.

Many of us were shaken by the closure of our churches with the public celebration of the Eucharist. However,

there was hope for us all in this desert experience. Services were livestreamed and people found they could pray in different contexts. The creativity of God in bringing life to our wilderness experiences gives us hope.

While Lent is a privileged time of grace it is not an end in itself. Its whole movement is towards the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This is the foundation of our joy and hope as Christians. All our sufferings, tears and struggles have been swept up into Jesus’ death on the cross and his triumph over all death and sin. Moreover, the hope offered to us as Christians is a hope for everyone. It is the story of the most incomprehensible love that has entered our world and radically affected the whole of history. We are redeemed by love. This overwhelming love is the foundation of our hope. All the signs of God’s presence in our own lives, in good times and bad, are signs of his love and commitment to us. Lent is the Church’s gift to us of a time when we can enter more deeply into the mystery of this love.

Tessa Sheaf is a psychotherapist and a regular contributor to *Living Word* and *Weekday Living Word*, available from Redemptorist Publications, www.rpbooks.co.uk

Lent Week One

REPENT

Dr Neville Cobbe encourages us to seize opportunities to glimpse God's grace at work throughout our readings for Lent, giving us the impetus to travel in hope as we turn anew towards our Lord.

WEDNESDAY 17 FEBRUARY

ASH WEDNESDAY

Responding humbly to grace

Joel 2:12-18; 2 Corinthians 5:20 – 6:2; Matthew 6:1-6. 16-18

Our readings for Ash Wednesday remind us to return humbly to our gracious God. Joel 2:13 describes God's character in terms of steadfast loving-kindness, denoted by the Hebrew word "chesed". God abounds in such loving-kindness, as repeatedly echoed throughout the Bible. Mindful of God's gracious nature, Joel encourages us to turn to God in repentance. Similarly, the apostle Paul implores us to be reconciled to God and not to receive his grace in vain. The Greek word used here to describe God's grace or unmerited favour is *charis*, which roughly corresponds to *chesed* in Hebrew. Yet as Joel urges us to rend our hearts and not our clothes, so our Lord Jesus also cautions against intending to immodestly impress others rather than primarily pleasing God privately.

Loving Lord, you already know the desires of our hearts and you alone are our best reward, so help us to realise the sufficiency of your grace as we begin our journey through Lent with you. Amen.

THURSDAY 18 FEBRUARY

Choosing wisely

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Luke 9:22-25

Our second day of Lent reveals a choice
Of life or death, where those who disobey
Choose diabolic death, or else rejoice
In life by loving our Lord every day.
Those saving selfishly their life may lose,
Whilst others losing life, their selves may save;
And so, let us be wise in what we choose,
Consider carefully how we behave.
Denying self, to daily heed God's voice,
Consider what is better, which is worse —
Does losing self to gain the world leave choice?
So, will we choose the blessing or the curse?
Though, when we follow Christ, we may have strife,
Let us take up the cross and thus choose life.

Our loving Father in heaven, strengthen us by your life-giving Spirit as we seek to follow faithfully your Son Jesus and thus walk in the light of life, both today and throughout the days to come. Amen.

"Sister, brother, even if you buried hope in your heart, don't give up! God is greater. Darkness and death don't have the last word. Courage, with God nothing is lost!"

Pope Francis

FRIDAY 19 FEBRUARY

Held fast

**Isaiah 58:1-9;
Matthew 9:14-15**

An elderly lady whom I knew was asked by a student what she was giving up for Lent. Without hesitation, she replied "Mass" – such was her humour!

Rather than focus on what we forsake when fasting, Isaiah proposes pleasing God by prioritising the needs of others. Whilst contemplating these verses, I found a worker honeybee struggling in a spider's web. The spider seemed too tiny to tackle such prey, so I cautiously disentangled the exhausted bee from entrapping silk and fed her diluted honey to recover her strength. "Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me: to break unjust fetters... to let the oppressed go free... sharing your food with the hungry... and not to turn away from your own kin?" If simple actions can help such fellow creatures, how much more should we serve God by tending to our kin created in his image?

Lord, you talked of a time for fasting and a time for feasting, so help us to give up our greed to serve those in need as we worship you. Amen.

SATURDAY 20 FEBRUARY

Mending to satisfy

**Isaiah 58:9-14;
Luke 5:27-32**

The healthy need no doctor, but the ill,
So Christ came not for righteous to repent,
But rather to save sinners, hence his will
In calling Levi, who then promptly went
And followed Jesus, prompting a remark
About his company with the convicted.

But Jesus let his light dawn in the dark
To sate the appetite of the afflicted.
For as Isaiah prophesied, God planned,

In promising to be our guide always,
To sate our appetites in arid land,
Giving a spring of water for all days.

His spring of living water never fails,
Repairs the breach and over sin prevails.

**Our loving Father in heaven,
thank you that you sent your
Son Jesus as repairer of the
breach to call all of us who are
unrighteous; guide us by your
Spirit so we may delight in you
by sharing both in word and
deed with others whom we find
in need. Amen.**

SUNDAY 21 FEBRUARY

1ST SUNDAY OF LENT

Gracious opportunity

**Genesis 9:8-15; 1
Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:12-15**

As Jesus entered Galilee, he proclaimed "The time is fulfilled". The specific Greek word for time denotes a critical opportunity to respond, thus entailing repentance while "the kingdom of God is close at hand". Regarding such portentous proclamations, there has been debate about the "spirits in prison" to whom Christ preached. Arguably influenced by the apocryphal book of Enoch, some identify these as fallen angels awaiting judgment whilst imprisoned in hell, to whom Christ presumably preached in triumph. Others interpret such spirits as lawless souls who perished in the flood, having tested God's patience "in Noah's time when the ark was being built". Accordingly, if the pre-incarnate Spirit of Christ inspired Noah's preaching to his corrupt contemporaries, this may reflect an earlier opportunity for repentance that was refused. Nevertheless, God graciously saved Noah and his family, sealing his covenant with an auspicious sign.

Loving Father in heaven, thank you that your Son died once and for all for our sins, the upright for the sake of the guilty, leading us to a new covenant with you. Amen.

MONDAY 22 FEBRUARY

A key question

1 Peter 5:1-4;
Matthew 16:13-19

They came to Caesarea Philippi,
A pagan region north of Galilee,

Where Jesus let his own disciples try
To work out whom they thought that
he might be.

Who is the Son of Man? Well, some
might say

That he is John the Baptist, others hold
Him as Elijah coming back some day,
Or Jeremiah, or some prophet old...

But Simon Peter's answer was inspired:
Confessing Jesus as Messiah, then

Son of the living God. So he acquired
The keys to bind on earth as in
heaven.

Years later, writing to the Church, this rock
Advises us in shepherding God's flock.

**Loving Lord, help each of us
to set an example to others in
selflessly following you with
eager trust, so that others may
see how our chief shepherd who
suffered for us is the Son of the
living God. Amen.**

TUESDAY 23 FEBRUARY

Go for God's will

Isaiah 55:10-11;
Matthew 6:7-15

Much could be said about the
prayer that Jesus taught us.
However, let us consider today
how we might seek God's will
with complete integrity. As Pope
Benedict XVI noted in his initial
volume entitled *Jesus of Nazareth*,
the reference to God's kingdom
inevitably implies God's dominion,
such that "his will is accepted as
the true criterion". When we pray
for God's name to be honoured
and seek his dominion on earth
as in heaven, then this entails
that we quietly humble ourselves,
rather than try to impress others
with loquacious verbosity. Praying
with integrity according to God's
will also requires that we must
be willing to forgive others,
if we expect God to similarly
forgive us. Prayer becomes truly
powerful when we seek to align
our room to manoeuvre with
God's providential purposes. By
prayerfully pursuing God's will,
we may better glimpse how God's
word does not return unfulfilled.

**Our Father in heaven, may
your name be held holy, your
kingdom come, your will be
done, on earth as in heaven.
Amen.**

WEDNESDAY 24 FEBRUARY

The sign of Jonah

Jonah 3:1-10; Luke 11:29-32

How apposite is it to seek a sign
After the erstwhile mute is seen to speak,
A demon thus cast out, and then opine
That this the prince of demons seeks to
wreak?

Is it a wonder if no further sign
Is offered? This adulterous cohort
With narrow minds sought Jesus to
malign,
And credit Beelzebul in their retort!
A contrast with the Ninevites, they who
Believed God's word when Jonah had
broadcast
Their city's overthrow, so their king too
Sat in sackcloth and ash to likewise fast.
Much more the Son of Man deserves
our ear
For something greater than Jonah is here.

**Lord God, as your living Word
convicts us, help us to truly repent
and turn from our sinful ways as the
people of Nineveh did, knowing that
you are graciously compassionate
and faithful to forgive. Amen.**

*"Faith begins when we realise we are in need of salvation. We are not
self-sufficient; by ourselves we founder: we need the Lord, like ancient
navigators needed the stars. Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives.
Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them."*

Pope Francis

THURSDAY 25 FEBRUARY

Persevering in prayer

Esther 4:17; Matthew 7:7-12

The Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, supplements the text of the book of Esther with petitionary prayers of both Mordecai and Queen Esther. However, the Hebrew text simply records how Mordecai complied with Esther's request to assemble all the Jews in the city of Susa and ask them to fast for her, foregoing food or drink for three days and nights, whilst she and the women with her would do likewise. Although the Hebrew text makes no overt reference to God, prayer seems to be implied by such fasting. Esther would be potentially risking her life when approaching the king without first being summoned. Nevertheless, pursuant to petitionary fasting, she asked and she received. Similarly, Jesus uses a sharply observant argument to encourage us to present our needs to our loving Father in heaven, who already has our best interests at heart.

Dear Lord, whatever we choose to go without this Lent, may it serve as a reminder to draw closer to you in prayer and petition with thanksgiving for all that you give us. Amen.

FRIDAY 26 FEBRUARY

Make peace with God

**Ezekiel 18:21-28;
Matthew 5:20-26**

Is there a righteous person on the earth Who never sins but always does what's right?
Whenever one's desire to sin gives birth, One goes against the law of God's delight. One may not murder, but may say "You fool" And harbour hateful feelings deep within; Regarding former righteousness, such rule Of hostile hatred shows that this is sin. So, seek to settle matters with your brother Before you give to God your offering. And try to form a friendship with such other Potential plaintiffs promptly, peace to bring. Since every soul who sins must surely die, Make peace with God and malice pacify.

Lord God of justice and mercy, help us to see whenever and however our ways are not right, so that we humbly confess to you and seek to make amends with others, rather than profess pride in our presumptive principled past. Amen.

SATURDAY 27 FEBRUARY

Perfect obedience

**Deuteronomy 26:16-19;
Matthew 5:43-48**

In Deuteronomy, we read the instruction to wholeheartedly obey all of God's commandments. Some thought they could claim to have done this, like the rich young ruler. However, our reading today from the Gospel according to Matthew shows us how Jesus tightens up God's law. Responding to a possible contemporary corruption of Leviticus 19:18 that apparently licenced hatred of enemies whilst loving one's neighbour, Jesus challenges us to prayerfully love our enemies. Whereas God repeatedly exhorted the Israelites to be holy, Jesus now tells us to be as perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. Clearly, this is impossible for us on our own. How can we hope to be either holy or perfect? Only through Christ fulfilling God's law.

Lord God, help us to demonstrate our love for you in following your commands, and whilst we confess our inability to do so on our own, help us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus who brings our faith to perfection. Amen.

DISCUSSION POINT

Speaking at St Peter's Square on 13 April 2016, Pope Francis declared, "There isn't a saint without a past, nor a sinner without a future".

How have we witnessed this in our readings so far during Lent?

Dr Neville Cobbe studied genetics at Trinity College Dublin and molecular cell biology at the University of Edinburgh, pursued a research career in biology and is now a theology student at Union Theological College and Queen's University Belfast.

Lent Week Two

REVEAL

Hope is beautiful, complex and, as Rev. Kate Bottley suggests, an absolute necessity in our daily lives, helping to make sense out of our many experiences of "non-sense". Hope helps us to live life to the full.



SUNDAY 28 FEBRUARY 2ND SUNDAY OF LENT

Hoping for change

Genesis 22:1-2. 9-13. 15-18; Romans 8:31-34; Mark 9:2-10

Sometimes when we've done something funny or kind, someone might say "Don't ever change!" I know what they mean: they'd like the good bits of me to stay the same. But while not all change is good, some is essential and something we should hope for. Our Gospel reading today is a story of change, the transfiguration. In a foretaste of his resurrected body, Jesus, while remaining himself, is transformed, recognisable to his disciples and yet entirely different. And he isn't the only one who is changed in this story. When the disciples went with him that day they couldn't have known what was going to happen, but one thing is certain, when they journeyed back down the hill they could not be the same people as they were.

Lord, transform us too, make the best bits of us even better and transfigure my failings with your love. Amen.

MONDAY 1 MARCH ST DAVID'S DAY

Hoping for others

Daniel 9:4-10; Luke 6:36-38

Our Gospel reading today has a rhythm and a poetry, very fitting for the poet-saint we remember today, St David. It's not the only thing that fits. The Gospel speaks of our collective responsibility to behave without judgement and condemnation to others, to be forgiving and to act mercifully, in the hope that we might receive the same. Life in St David's monastic rule was austere, but the life of the individual was inseparable from the life of the collective. In the fields, monks pulled the ploughs themselves and possessions were held in common. We sometimes talk about an individual's independence, but God's kingdom is one of interdependence, a mirror of the Trinitarian nature of God. No-one's journey of life is alone.

Lord, fill us with forgiveness and mercy, quick to love and slow to judge, help us to hope for the best for others and in return grant us your grace. Amen.

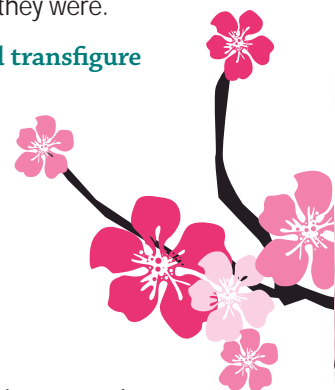
TUESDAY 2 MARCH

Hoping to be unsettled

Isaiah 1:10. 16-20; Matthew 23:1-12

According to reports, the artist Frida Kahlo's last words were "I hope the exit is joyful and I hope never to return." Charlie Chaplin, on hearing the priest at his bedside say "May the Lord have mercy on your soul", replied "Why not? It belongs to him." Sometimes you never forget the last words someone said to you. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is saying some of his final words. It's the last week of his life so there's an urgency to his instructions: this is what matters, what counts. His words are not comfortable, though: they are warnings against hypocrisy. "Don't be the kind of people who say one thing but do another," he warns. "Lift up the lowly and stay humble." He speaks the same words to us; our faith can bring comfort, but it also stirs us up into unsettled holiness.

Lord, unsettle us with your Holy Spirit, stir us into acts of life-changing love, never afraid to speak even if the words are hard to hear. Help us to be ever-hopeful for your kingdom. Amen.



WEDNESDAY 3 MARCH

Hoping for the unexpected

Jeremiah 18:18-20; Matthew 20:17-28

There's a road in Derbyshire that, when I was a child, my dad loved to drive us along. It's called "Surprise View". Around the corner of an ordinary country lane, suddenly, the vista opens and you get a great eyeful of the most amazing valley below. Jesus was a surprise. Not really the kind of Messiah that was expected. The hoped-for Messiah was perhaps going to be a great military or political leader, not a carpenter's lad from Nazareth. And here in our Gospel reading Jesus keeps the surprises coming, identifying himself as a servant, not a king. He is the Messiah on a donkey, not a warrior on a chariot, the one who kneels to wash feet and touch the "untouchable". Jesus might not have quite been what was expected but he was what was needed: fully God, fully human. The kingdom of God and its Messiah are full of surprises.

Lord, help us to never limit the work of your Holy Spirit in the world to our own expectations. Keep us ever hopeful of holy surprises. Amen.

FRIDAY 5 MARCH

Hoping to be self-aware

Genesis 37:3-4. 12-13. 17-28; Matthew 21:33-43. 45-46

Gentle Jesus meek and mild? As if! In this Gospel reading, Jesus is telling it straight. If the chief priests and Pharisees were in any doubt before, they can't be now, Jesus is holding them to account and it doesn't take a theology degree to work out who is supposed to be who, in this parable. But wait a minute, who are we in the story? We'd like to be the servants, working hard and doing as they're asked but what if we are the tenants? The tenants reject the Son, steal and kill, and while we might not go to such extremes, there are times when we deny Jesus through our words and actions, behaving more like the Pharisees. But even if we do, it isn't hopeless: redemption is offered limitlessly through Jesus. He offered it then and he offers it now.

Lord, thank you for the sure and certain hope you give of forgiveness, despite the times we deny you and fall short. Help us to know your love. Amen.

"See what a Christ-shaped church looks like! It delights in God... It has the heart of God. It is the very presence of God, the hand of God, the wisdom of God. It is hope that springs out of what looked to be utter despair."

Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

THURSDAY 4 MARCH

Hoping to hear

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 16:19-31

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a story of inequality run through with a warning to pay heed while there's still time. The rich man in Hades reflects on his life and the gulf between him and Lazarus, one that cannot be narrowed. The rich man wants to warn others not to make the same mistake as he did, but is told that the living have all the information they need. We sometimes say "If only I'd known! If only I'd realised!" But life is not a new journey: countless others have been here before us. And, like ignoring the travel reviews and guidebooks, and then complaining about the destination, the advice is there but sometimes we choose not to listen and think we know best. We rarely do.

Lord, who gives us ears to hear, help us, by the power of your Holy Spirit, to listen to your living word, Jesus, known through the written word of the Gospel. Help us to not think we know better. Amen.

SATURDAY 6 MARCH

Hoping for embrace

Micah 7:14-15. 18-20;
Luke 15:1-3. 11-32

There's nothing like coming home. The joy of seeing someone after a long time apart, a loved one walking through airport arrivals, or the car pulling up on the drive and glimpsing through the window, shouting "They're home!": the welcome back is priceless. My favourite bit of today's familiar Gospel is just eight little words, "While he was still a long way off". When the Father sees the Prodigal Son in the distance, he is moved by pity and compelled to journey towards him: he can't wait to hold him. Who can forget the first hug with their loved one as lockdown was eased? God waits for us to move closer, for the distance to narrow and the moment it does, we are embraced, loved and rejoiced over.

Lord, thank you for loving us, forgiving us and embracing us. Help us to move ever closer to you. Amen.

DISCUSSION POINT

Can you think of a time when hope has played an important part in your life?

What are some of the hopes in your heart this Lent?

Rev. Kate Bottley is a Church of England vicar in north Nottinghamshire. She is well-known for her part-time roles as a journalist and a presenter on radio and television where, amongst other things, she regularly presents Songs of Praise on BBC1.

Lent Week Three

REBUILD

Through his work at The Passage, Mick Clarke spends his life rebuilding vulnerable and broken lives. In this third week of Lent, can we also do some repair work?

SUNDAY 7 MARCH
3RD SUNDAY OF LENT

Angry at injustice

Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:22-25; John 2:13-25

This Gospel passage can sometimes be one of the most confusing. In our minds we have an image of Jesus as someone who is always calm, always peaceful; so how can it be that we suddenly see an image of Jesus who is angry and overturning stalls in the Temple?

Anger is a powerful emotion. However, unlike hate (of which nothing good can come) much good can come from appropriate anger. Jesus is angry at injustice, that the poor are being manipulated and those who are exploiting them are making a profit from doing so.

We too are called to be angry when we see injustice in our world; surely as Christians there is something wrong if we do not? But this anger must have a purpose: an anger that produces actions in us that lead to us getting involved (peacefully) to bring about change to address this injustice.

Lord, make my heart burn with love for those I see being exploited and give me the courage to speak out against injustice in our world. Amen.

MONDAY 8 MARCH

Who does he think he is?

2 Kings 5:1-15; Luke 4:24-30

One can imagine the scene: the local boy, son of a carpenter, having the audacity to talk with such authority about things that he possibly can't understand. There would be certain people to whom God may give a revelation, but not to a lowly carpenter's son. We in authority know better!

How often do we, perhaps even unconsciously, find ourselves thinking that we are better than someone else, that our opinion and understanding are worth more than theirs? How open are we to have our long-held and established views and thoughts challenged, in order that we may continue to grow and develop?

It is only by being open to hearing and learning from others that we grow and develop; we always have more to learn and we often find (when we reflect) that that learning comes from the most unlikely and unplanned situations, if only we have that spirit of openness in us to recognise it.

Lord, give me a spirit of openness to discern your voice in all situations and a spirit of humility in knowing that I can truly learn from everyone and every situation. Amen.

TUESDAY 9 MARCH

The liberation of forgiveness

Daniel 3:25. 34-43; Matthew 18:21-35

We all remember times we have been hurt. It's easier to forgive when things have been said in the heat of the moment, but so much harder when someone has really hurt us or betrayed our trust.

Jesus challenges us all to forgive others, not just in this Gospel passage, but also in so many others, including the Lord's Prayer "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Jesus makes it clear that we will be judged by the way we judge others: how we choose to forgive others and show mercy to them.

When we forgive someone who has really hurt us, it does not mean that what they did was okay: that is for their conscience. However, to be able to move on with our life we often need to let go of that pain and anger, to be liberated by the gift of forgiveness.

Lord, give me the gift of forgiveness in order for me to be able to move on from pain and hurt, and live my life to the full. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 10 MARCH

Becoming Christ

Deuteronomy 4:1. 5-9; Matthew 5:17-19

Our Gospel passages this week are all linked and flow together. Tuesday's highlights a prophet not being accepted in his own town. Today's focuses on Jesus as the fulfilment of the scriptures. Friday's draws everything together into the greatest commandments of love.

This is radical stuff! But how radical is our response? Do we view the commandments as a set of rules and regulations that we try to follow, or do we fully embrace them and live them? As Christians we are called to become more and more like Christ. When looking at scripture, are we there as an observer, or there as a participant, actively living out its message and becoming more like Jesus?

Lord, help me enter fully into scripture to be an example to others in day to day life as I walk on my journey with you. Amen.

FRIDAY 12 MARCH

The greatest commandments

Hosea 14:2-10; Mark 12:28-34

In this Gospel passage we see Jesus asked which of the commandments is the most important. Jesus says, " 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. 'The second is this, " 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself. ' There is no commandment greater than these."

Jesus calls you and me to get the balance right between these two commandments; it is no good saying we love God, yet, when it comes to our day to day interactions with each other, we behave poorly. In our interactions with other people, in our actions and choices in our areas of work and in our global views we must act in a way we would want others to act towards us.

As St Vincent de Paul once said, "You will go out to the poor ten times a day, and ten times a day you will see the face of God."

Lord, help me see you in those I encounter today and treat them as I would wish to be treated. Amen.

"The building of the kingdom requires not only the grace of God, but also the active willingness of humanity. Everything is done by grace... but it takes 'my' responsibility, 'my' willingness."

Pope Francis

THURSDAY 11 MARCH

Time for God

Jeremiah 7:23-28; Luke 11:14-23

In this Gospel reading we see the power of Jesus manifest. Many are amazed and see it for what it is: God's glory and power in action. The Pharisees see an opportunity to discredit and sow doubt, and suggest that it is evil driving out evil. However, as Martin Luther King Jr once said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

How do we react when God manifests his power in our lives? When we first fall in love with someone, we want to be with them all the time; when we are parted physically we text, chat on the phone and maybe even Zoom! What power would be manifest in our lives if we gave even just a small percentage of that time to listen to God each day?

Lord, help me find time each day to fully listen to your voice and experience your love for me. Amen.

SATURDAY 13 MARCH

Equal in God's eyes

Hosea 5:15 – 6:6;
Luke 18:9-14

All of us have an ego. No one likes it when we have played by the rules, done the right things and then someone (who seemingly has done everything wrong) gets what we perceive to be preferential treatment!

We are all created equal in Jesus' eyes. He calls us to a personal relationship with him without calculating the degree of his relationship with others.

We are all, whoever we are and whatever role in life we play, unworthy of God's love and mercy; yet by grace we receive both. As the saying goes, "Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future."

Lord, in this season of Lent help me focus on my relationship with you, not on judging others. Amen.

DISCUSSION POINT

The theme of this *Lent Extra* is Travelling in Hope. What practical and tangible steps can we take to find time each day to listen to God's voice and reflect on scripture to better equip us for this journey?

Mick Clarke is the Chief Executive of The Passage.

The Passage provides services that prevent and end homelessness. It runs the UK's largest resource centre, as well as outreach services and accommodation. <https://passage.org.uk>.

"If you are weak and fragile on the way, if you fall. Do not be afraid! God holds out your hand and says to you: 'Courage!' You cannot give it to yourself, but you can receive it as a gift. Just open your heart in prayer, just lift that stone placed at the mouth of the heart a little, to let the light of Jesus enter. Just invite him, 'Come, Jesus, into my fears and say to me too, Courage!'"

Pope Francis

Lent Week Four

RESTORE

SUNDAY 14 MARCH

4TH SUNDAY OF LENT

All is not lost

2 Chronicles 36:14-16. 19-23; Ephesians 2:4-10; John 3:14-21

God is gentle. Jesus is gentle. Natasha Pritchard suggests that, this Lent, we can trust in their gentleness and flourish in our faith, hope and love.

In today's first reading, we witness God's own people choosing to turn their back on him. It is a story of rejection and despair. We have all turned away from God at some point, defiling his temple in our own hearts through cruelty or even just apathy. Yet when we read this account alongside the second reading and the Gospel, we see that all is not lost. We see the journey of hope that God presents to each of us. With our God there is always hope of redemption.

God sent his only son to us, mortals and sinners, to bring us back to God. Lent is a time for coming to terms with the fact that we are sinners. We come to this realisation not to weigh us down, but to give us hope that God will welcome us back, no matter what mistakes we have made in the past.

Lord, help me to learn from past mistakes and to know that you love me in spite of them. Amen.

MONDAY 15 MARCH

God comes gently

Isaiah 65:17-21; John 4:43-54

How do we react when God answers our prayers in a way we were not expecting? Do we let our own pride and hurt feelings get in the way, or do we surrender and adapt to God's will? Naaman almost allows his pride to get in the way of his being healed of leprosy. He expects a great fanfare to accompany his miracle, and feels anger and disappointment when this is not the case.

Sometimes God comes to us gently, in the ordinary things. We think about miracles as great events, but often it is just a kind word from a stranger, or a simple meeting with a friend that gives us healing or draws us closer to God. We should open our eyes and hearts to notice God in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary.

Let me be open to you today, Lord, in whatever way you desire. Amen.

TUESDAY 16 MARCH

Forgive and be forgiven

Ezekiel 47:1-9. 12; John 5:1-3. 5-16

Forgiving someone who has wronged us is a real act of charity, something which allows us to grow and to move forward with our lives. Yet in practice, it can be a terrifying prospect. Jesus teaches us that we must forgive – but often it takes us time to work through the hurt that has been caused by another. Forgiveness should always be our goal, but we shouldn't be hard on ourselves if it takes us a long time.

Forgiving ourselves is not easy either. We must be patient with ourselves, as God is patient with us. We make the same mistakes over and over again, but God does not give up on us. We are flawed human beings – each and every one of us – and we need to recognise this and turn back to God with all our hearts.

Let me learn to forgive others, as you forgive me. Amen.