

LENT COURSE 2019

# *The Mystery of God*



ASH WEDNESDAY

# *The Mystery of Life and Death*

## READINGS

- Joel 2.1-2, 12-17  
or Isaiah 58.1-12
- Psalm 51.1-17
- 2 Corinthians 5.20b-6:10
- Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

## STARTING OUT

**Made in the image of God**  
(Genesis 1.26)



*Remember you are dust and to dust you will return...*

Ash Wednesday can be a rather sombre occasion, as Christians are invited to be marked with the sign of the cross using the ash of burned palm leaves in preparation for the journey of Lent. We are asked to think about the mystery of being alive, and the journey we make from coming into the world as new-born children to the time we leave it.

If you think about the huge history and the future of planet Earth as a long line and randomly pick a point on that timeline, the overwhelming likelihood is that you will not be alive at that point. We do not live in the time of the dinosaurs; we will not live in the 23rd or 24th century like the heroes of Star Trek. We live now. For good or ill, this is our time. We think about how extraordinary it is that we have our lives, made human and in the image of God, and about what God wants us to do with the time we have. Every human life is exceptionally precious, and is filled with value, meaning and purpose. And somewhere in that timeline there is a brief spark that makes everything light up. That spark is you.



Ash Wednesday service in Westminster Cathedral

Photo: Mazur/catholicchurch.org.uk

## SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

**Past, Future and Now**



- “
- What do you think it would have been like to visit Jerusalem in the time of Jesus?
  - What do you think life will be like for people 100 years from now?
  - What does Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent mean for you today?
  - What do you think it means to be ‘made in the image of God’?
- ”

## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

**'Fearfully and Wonderfully made'** (Psalm 139.14)



“

When Joe was born, I remember the first thing I thought was “I can’t believe that Mark and I could be blessed with this beautiful new little life”...

It was overwhelming, that he was breathing and crying for the very first time...

All these amazing firsts, starting with that first cry, that first drink, that first dirty nappy! ...I just felt so grateful....

I wanted to thank everybody, the midwife, Mark, my parents, my friends. I wanted to give thanks over and over, for this precious new life.

”

“

When we knew Pat was terminal, all I could think about was – that was her last birthday, her last Christmas, her last time in the garden. When she died, I was holding her hand. It was the last thing I did for her when she was still alive. I thought, “where’s she gone?” It’s a mystery.

”

“

...the moment when God comes to claim his own, when sin and failure fall away and the true beauty of the soul is glimpsed, is always a moment of sheer wonder

**Sister Catherine Wyborne,  
iBenedictines**

”



Vinoth Chandar

Photo: Flickr/Vinoth Chandar

- Why do you think people are often overwhelmed with deep emotions at births and deaths?
- What would you say to the new mother about why she wanted to give thanks?
- What would you say to the bereaved husband about his question, “where’s she gone?”
- How do you think baptisms and funerals bring out the mystery of life and death?

## SOME SCRIPTURE TO PONDER

### Life and Death



*Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near – a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!* Joel 2.1-2

In the book of Joel the writer talks about a huge plague of locusts blotting out the sky and a terrible drought. The result is starvation and death for people as grain and vines are stripped away. The writer thinks of the locusts as God’s army and this disaster as an image of the day of the Lord. God will judge a sinful people and



the result is death and destruction. But amazingly, God also promises new wine, grain and oil and restoration of the people. If the people believe and turn to God, God will deliver them out of death to new life.

- How do you think the people felt when all their hard work was ruined by the locusts and left them with nothing to eat?
- How does the writer of Joel engage with the mystery of life and death?

## SOMETHING TO DO

### Life and Death today



Photo: Flickr/ Laika ac

Have a look at this BBC video from Planet Earth 2 (3 mins 44):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bx5JUGVahk>

- Plagues of locusts are still very much part of today's world. How should we respond to people whose lives are threatened by natural disaster?
- What resources have we got today to help people live well and to deliver them from death?
- What ONE thing could we commit to change in Lent to help people whose lives are less than God wants for them and to help those in danger of death?

## SOMETHING TO PRAY



Photo: Flickr/ Seth Capitulo

*God of the Living and of the Dead,*  
we thank you for the gift of our lives,  
for all new life, for all who come after us.

We thank you for all who have gone before us,  
on whose lives we build our own,  
who have walked the paths where we now walk.

We thank you that we are fearfully and wonderfully made,  
for the gifts and opportunities you have given us,  
for your sustaining love in good times and bad.

May we always treasure the lives of others.  
Help us to remember those facing danger and death,  
and work to give everyone fullness of life.

*Amen*

### For a prayerful meditation:

*Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom*  
(Taizé)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGB2E0NzO2A>  
(3 mins 20)

## THE MYSTERY OF GOD

### God became one of us



One of the amazing mysteries of the Christian faith, set out in the creeds, is that Jesus, who is 'of one being with the Father' becomes a human being just like each one of us. The God who has created the universe and all that is in it becomes limited in time and space, for a human



“

In Jostein Gaarder's *Through a Glass Darkly*, a dying child and an angel have a conversation. The angel says that God is looking forward to finding out all about the child's life and experiences of her human life.

”

lifetime. This is the Incarnation of Jesus. But what does this really mean?

The Gospels don't go into every little detail of Jesus's human life. But they tell us enough for us to be sure that Jesus is entirely a human being, not some sort of pretend person. Jesus grows in his mother's womb just as each one of us must do. He and his mother go through the danger and trauma of birth. Jesus survives, grows and learns. He feels as we do and experiences emotions, including anger, fear and grief. He eats, drinks, sleeps and wakes. He has to decide how to be obedient to God and accept God's will for him. He makes powerful friendships and cares for others. We are told how he suffers pain as we do, that he bleeds. And that he dies as all of us must die. But that is not the end of the story...

“

*Knees and hearts to him we bow;  
Of our flesh and of our bone  
Jesus is our brother now,  
And God is all our own*

**Charles Wesley**

”

The Incarnation of Jesus means that God does not have to seem remote and far away to us, or too great and heavenly for us to understand. When we think about what being alive feels to us, with all its joys and woes, we can be sure that God knows what that is, because Jesus has lived as we do. The Mystery of the Incarnation assures us that God knows our situation and that when we pray, God knows our needs. Your Father knows what you need (Matthew 6.8). On Ash Wednesday, when we think about our own lives, we can be sure that God knows how we feel. God is with us.

- What do the lines of Charles Wesley's hymn (above) mean to you?



Giorgione, *The Holy Family*

## SOMEWHERE TO GO

### Entering the Mystery



Now go with Jesus into the desert:

- ...Sit in silence and leave distractions behind.
- ...Concentrate on quiet breathing. Know that you are alive.
- ...Know that one day you will die - but not today.
- ...Know that God has a purpose for you, made in God's image.
- ...Find one picture or one word or one simple phrase from the resource so far.
- ...Holding that picture, word or phrase in your mind.
- ...Reach out to the mystery and wonder that is God.
- ...Close your eyes for one minute, then reopen them and sit in silence for one more minute.
- ...Take time to note anything that may come to you.
- ...Give thanks as appropriate.

Finish with the Lord's Prayer.



### Other resources

Find out more about Ash Wednesday at:  
<http://www.spiritualjourneys.org.uk/explore/AshWednesday2.pdf>

# The Mystery of Good and Evil

Photo: Flickr/ Zoltán Vörös

## READINGS

- Deuteronomy 26.1-11
- Psalm 91.1-2, 9-16
- Romans 10:8b-13
- Luke 4:1-13

## STARTING OUT

### Why is there good and evil in the world?



When people say that they cannot believe in God and that the Christian faith makes no sense, it's often because they can't get their heads round the presence of undeniable evil in the world. Human beings are capable of such terrible things and good people often suffer at the hands of others who use their power to hurt and dominate. Why does God let the sun shine on good people and bad people alike? (Matthew 5.45) Why do the wicked people prosper at the expense of others? Why doesn't God do something to force the world to be more equitable and just?

These questions are not new and are part of an age-old reflection on why the world is as it is, what God has to do with the mystery of Good and Evil, and what our part is in all this.

When Jesus teaches his followers how to pray, he specifically includes the words:

*Lead us not into temptation (the time of trial),  
But deliver us from evil.*

This makes the connection between a spiritual path of obedience to God's will which actively seeks out the good and learning to guard against choosing evil, because we all get tempted and tested. On this first stage of our Lenten journey, we need to think about our freedom to choose what kind of path we will take



*Temptation of Christ, St Mark's Venice*

through our human life. What sort of obstacles lie in our way? As we begin Lent, we journey with Jesus into the struggle with these difficult questions.

## SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

### Good and Evil



- “
- How would you start a conversation with someone who was worried about the evil in our world?
  - Where do you see people of other faiths, or those who do not have a specific faith, dedicating themselves for the good of others? When can religion do harm?
  - What would a world full of goodness and mercy actually look like?
- ”



## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

### Temptation



The early Christian theologian, Origen of Alexandria, wrote an extensive meditation on the Lord's Prayer. This is what he writes about the petition to keep us from temptation and evil:

“

It is when a man succumbs in the moment of tempting, I take it, that he enters into temptation, being held in its nets. Into those nets the Saviour entered for the sake of those who had already been caught in them, and in the words of the Song of Songs, looking out through the meshwork makes answer to those who have been already caught by them and have entered into temptation, and says to those who form His bride: Arise, my dear one, my fair one, my dove. To bring home the fact that every time is one of temptation on earth, I will add that even he who meditates upon the law of God day and night and makes a practice of carrying out the saying, A righteous man's mouth shall meditate on wisdom, has no release from being tempted. How many in their devotion to the examination of the divine Scriptures have, through misunderstanding the messages contained in Law and Prophets, devoted themselves to godless and impious or to foolish and ridiculous opinions?

”

### Origen, On Prayer, XIX

[http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/origen\\_on\\_prayer\\_02\\_text.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/origen_on_prayer_02_text.htm)

Origen imagines that when we give in to temptation to evil we are caught like a fish thrashing about in a net. We are trapped and struggling and our freedom to live abundantly is stopped. Jesus, though, can free us from the net. Origen also reminds us that being religious people does not stop us from being tempted and falling into evil ways, in fact, it might be our very piety that makes us arrogant and full of pride, taking the Scriptures and using them as if we owned them, using them to prop up what we want, and not listening to what Jesus tells us through the gospels.

- What temptations have you had to resist in your life?
- Where do you see people today being trapped by evil?
- How do you think people might use the Scriptures to hurt others?
- How would you explain to another person how Jesus releases us from the nets of temptation and evil?

### Story:

“

I was stuck in a low-paying job and badly wanted a bit more money. One of my colleagues was heavily into cocaine. He used to phone his dealer and a courier would bike it round. I would be sent to pick it up from outside our work building. One day the courier said, you could make some extra money like I do. It's easy. You'll never get caught. All sorts of things flashed before my eyes – no more struggling to pay bills, taking my wife out, buying my kids nice things, saving up for a holiday. I thought about it and then I thought about the people buying the drugs and what I'd be getting into. So I prayed not to be tempted. And although I was, very, tempted, I said no.

”



## SOME SCRIPTURE TO PONDER

### God's Protection



*Because you have made the Lord your refuge,  
the Most High your dwelling-place,  
no evil shall befall you,  
no scourge come near your tent.*

*For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.  
On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against  
a stone.*

*You will tread on the lion and the adder,  
the young lion and the serpent you will  
trample under foot.*

*Those who love me, I will deliver;  
I will protect those who know my name.  
When they call to me, I will answer them;  
I will be with them in trouble,  
I will rescue them and honour them.  
With long life I will satisfy them,  
and show them my salvation.*

#### Psalm 91. 9-16

In Luke's gospel, it is the Tempter who quotes this Scripture at Jesus. The temptation put before him is to test whether God's promise is literally true. If Jesus puts himself in harm's way, then God must come to save him or this Scripture is a lie. Jesus refuses, saying that God

is not to be tested in this way. But Jesus has already said that we must live by God's word. So why does he refuse to test God with Scripture? Or are we to understand that Scripture nourishes us differently and more deeply?

- What do you think this psalm tells us about God's love for us?
- Why do you think Jesus said God was not to be tested? Why not?
- Are there times where you have really been aware of God's protection?
- Are there times when you have experienced the presence of evil?

### SOMETHING TO DO



Have a look at this *Financial Times* video about greed and the love of money (2 mins.59):

<https://www.ft.com/video/517e1de2-9e4e-39d9-80b3-37773ee23b00>

- The video ends with the suggestion that people take more notice of religious advice. What advice would you give someone tempted by offers of wealth and power?
- What ONE thing could you take on in your community to help people who might be tempted to make bad decisions which could hurt themselves and others?

### SOMETHING TO PRAY



*Loving God, source of all goodness,  
help us to follow your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord,  
and with him, understand and resist temptation.  
Help us to put others before ourselves,  
to resist the lures of power and an easy life,  
to listen and reach out for your will above all.  
Amen*

#### For a prayerful meditation:

*I am sure I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.*



Photo: Flickr / Piers Cañadas



## THE MYSTERY OF GOD

### God became one of us



One of the most mysterious things about God is that God gives us free will to decide for ourselves how to live and even to reject God's love. Yet we are also given guidance about how to choose wisely and well.

God became a human being in Jesus, just as we are. In the story of Jesus' Temptation before he begins his public ministry, we see in dramatic fashion the life choices we all must make. No matter what our circumstances, we have the power to make some choices - whether to seek out what God wants for us and find out our vocation from God, or to turn away and forge our own paths through life.

This freedom to make a choice for God and to discover God's will in our complicated world is central to discovering the value, meaning and purpose of life. Without that freedom, we would not discover anything about who we truly are, or find what satisfies us or feels like a deep sense of rightness. But such freedom carries risk. We are free to make other choices, pursue other paths, seek out power and domination of others and ignore God's call to us.

The gospels tell us that Jesus examined those choices too. We are told of those huge, glittering temptations of power and glory in the world. Jesus knows these things are possible for him. Exhausted by his denial of self, Jesus can see that path, that easy life. Yet he rejects them all, not just for himself, but because he wants to know God's vision of the world, to pursue God's mission and God's justice.

Jesus' response to the temptations offered to him shows us the way. If we really want to know why evil exists in the world, then we must look deep inside ourselves. Human beings dominate the planet. Our choices affect the fates of all our neighbours. Jesus shows us how to make choices that open up God's will for us. He shows us how to use our God-given free will to create best possible future for ourselves, by denying what is easy and turning away from the paths to evil, and destruction of ourselves and others, even our world.

And this helps us see that the one of the most mysterious things about God is that God finds the creation to be good and continues to call us, love us and bless us despite the risk that we will turn our backs, walk away and ruin the world that God has made.

- How does Jesus help us understand how to seek God's will for us?

“

Forty Days and Forty Nights  
Thou wast fasting in the wild  
Forty Days and Forty Nights  
Tempted and yet undefiled.

George Hunt Smyttan

”

## ENTERING THE MYSTERY

### Being tested



Now be with Jesus at the time of testing:

...Sit in silence and leave distractions behind.

...Concentrate on quiet breathing.

...Bring before you the things that distract you

...all the things you are worried about

...all the things that tempt you to an easy life, wants,  
longings

...Think about Jesus's determination to be obedient to  
the Father.

...Find one picture or one word or one simple phrase  
from the resource so far.

...Holding that picture, word or phrase in your mind.

...Reach out to the mystery and wonder that is God

...who gives you strength to face temptation and  
overcome it.

...Close your eyes for one minute, then reopen them and  
sit in silence for one more minute.

...Take time to note anything that may come to you.

...Give thanks as appropriate.

Finish with the Lord's Prayer.

### Other resources

<http://www.youthworkresource.com/youth-work/ready-to-use-session-plans/lords-prayer-series-6-temptation-evil/>



WEEK 2

# The Mystery of God's Glory

## READINGS

- **Genesis 15.1-12, 17-18**
- **Psalm 27**
- **Philippians 3.17-4:1**
- **Luke 13.31-35 or  
Luke 9.28-36, (37-43a)**

## STARTING OUT

**God gets our attention**



“

The world is charged with  
the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil

**Gerard Manley Hopkins,**  
*God's Grandeur*

”

Have you ever watched a thunderstorm approaching? Against the darkness of the thunderclouds, you might suddenly see a big lightning strike or a sheet of white light flicker suddenly and disappear. If you are looking directly at it, you might see an after-image of the intense brightness on your vision. That can be a startling and awe-inspiring experience – we see the power and intensity of nature at work.

It can be difficult to get across the idea of a transcendent experience and for many people who have had powerful and life-changing experiences of God, words simply fail them. In classical art, many representations of God and Jesus and in paintings of scenes from the Bible often show figures surrounded by haloes of brilliant light or lit with sun-rays. Other artists



have used gold and silver to depict the idea of God's glory and what it might be like to look upon something heavenly rather than earthly. Similarly in today's reading about the Transfiguration of Jesus, Peter sees Jesus shining in clothes of dazzling white.

## SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

**Glimpsing God at work**



“

- Where and when has God managed to catch your attention?
- When you look back, where do you see God at work in your life?
- What is your most memorable spiritual experience?
- When do you see God shining out from the lives of others?

”



## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

### God around us and within us



Stories:

“

When I was thirteen, I had a very strange dream. It started off as a rather boring, ordinary dream about being in a car with my dad going back to our house. When the car stopped, my dad went into our house and I went to follow him. But I couldn't open the gate. Then our garden seemed to be filled with very white sunlight and there was someone there. I couldn't see the person properly because of all the light in the garden. The person said, 'You don't need to follow your dad.' I said 'Why?' and that person said, 'Because I need you to do something for me'. Then my dad came out and told me to come in and all the light went away and I felt really sad, wondering where it had gone and what it was I was supposed to do for the person who spoke to me.

”

“

My parents called me Shekinah, which means 'glory of God'. I love my name. The root of my name suggests birds which like to settle down in a nest, like a mother hen with all her chicks underneath her. So it's like God 'settling down' among us when we pray together or gather together for worship. It's like that moment when you just know that God is with you. It's like a holy fire or a holy light, when you light the candles for worship and the glow of God's presence is suddenly there. It's like when you walk into a darkened church and there's candles burning or a sanctuary lamp and you know that God is there in that place. I love telling people about my name. They always ask me questions and I tell them to go visit a church and see the Shekinah for themselves!

”

- What do you think the person might have made of their dream?
- How does your church show forth God's glory and how might you explore that with visitors?

## SOME SCRIPTURE TO PONDER

### A mysterious sign from God



*As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.*

*When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces [of the sacrifice]*

**Genesis 15.12;17**

In this mysterious and spine-tingling scene, Abraham falls into a sleep as deep as that of Adam at the creation of Eve. God has promised him that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens, but from this cosmic external vision, Abraham is now alone with God in this extraordinary internal darkness. Here too, he encounters God. God continues the solemn promise, a covenant, about his future and that of his descendants. The scene ends with something even more mysterious: a smoking brazier and a flaming light moving around the sacrifice in the darkness.

- Have you ever encountered God externally in the beauty of nature or internally in a dream? If so, what happened in that encounter and what effect did it have on your life?
- What do you make of the fiery lights? Where do you think we see God at work today?
- How do we know God is faithful to God's promises?

## SOMETHING TO DO



Have a look at this video (4 minutes, 26 seconds):

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=iY0XyZ9-qYw>

- The video says that churches were built to mark the place of transfiguration. How could your church be a beacon of God's glory to others?
- What ONE thing could you do in the community to help people know 'the kingdom, the power and the glory' of God?



Duccio, *Transfiguration*, The Yorck Project

Help us to name your glory  
In our words and in our witness  
So that all may find you for themselves.

*Amen*

### For a prayerful meditation:

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

**John 1.14**

## THE MYSTERY OF GOD

## SOMETHING TO PRAY



*Lord God,*

You appear to us in unexpected places:  
In forests and on mountain-tops  
On city streets and in neon lights.  
You come to us in the lives of others  
In loved ones, in unloved ones on the street.  
We see you shine out from the ordinary.  
We hear your still, small voice.  
We feel your presence in our hearts.  
We know your glory in our worship  
In bread and wine shared  
In music made together  
In fellowship with one another.

## God reveals God's Glory



*Our King comes in majestic glory.  
Let us light our lamps and go forth to meet Him.*

*Let us find our joy in Him, for He has found joy in us.  
He will indeed rejoice us with His marvellous light.  
Let us glorify the majesty of the Son and give thanks to the almighty Father  
Who, in an outpouring of love, sent Him to us, to fill us with hope and salvation.  
When He manifests Himself, the saints awaiting Him in weariness and sorrow,  
will go forth to meet Him with lighted lamps.*

**From Hymn to the Light,  
St Ephrem the Syrian**



## Have a look at *The Chapel* by R S Thomas

<https://allpoetry.com/The-Chapel>

Some of the most mysterious parts of the Bible are powerful descriptions of direct encounters with God or angels as messengers of God. In the book of Exodus, Moses asks to see the full extent of the glory of God, but God says that no one can fully encounter God's own self and stay alive. Instead, God gives Moses a glimpse of glory while protecting him from being overwhelmed by the Presence (33.17-23). Later, when Moses comes down from the mountain, he is transfigured by his encounter; his skin shines (34.29-30). Such encounters are called in Latin, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, which means an experience of the numinous which is both terrifying and fascinating at the same time, inspiring awe. When the prophet Ezekiel meets God, he is completely overwhelmed and dumbfounded by the incredible vision (Ezekiel 1). Listen to the ringing words of Isaiah 6.1-5, and the incredible impact of angel voices, wings beating, the smoke swirling and the pillars trembling. Similarly, the shepherds in the account of the Jesus' birth are amazed and overcome by the dazzling sight of angels (Luke 2.8-14).

So encounters with God change us forever, but in a way which others can see, - if we let them. Peter wonders what he is supposed to do in response to the vision of glory. But Scripture shows us the answer, the vision of the glory of God comes in unforgettable experiences with news for human beings about who God is and what

Earthen Lamps, Flickr / Dhinal Chheda



God is doing in the world – the Ten Commandments, the Good News of Jesus' birth, the reality of Jesus as God's Beloved Son.

And later, the disciples will find two dazzling supernatural beings sitting in an empty tomb... but that is for the end of our journey.

- Where do you think people meet angels of God today?

## SOMEWHERE TO GO

### Entering the Mystery



Now go with Peter to Mount Tabor:

...Sit in silence and leave distractions behind.

...Concentrate on quiet breathing.

...Think about Peter climbing the mountain with James and John.

...Imagine the encounter with God's glory on the mountain top.

...his friend and Teacher revealed as God's Son, the Beloved.

...Find one picture or one word or one simple phrase from the resource so far.

...Holding that picture, word or phrase in your mind.

...Reach out to the mystery and wonder that is Jesus transfigured.

...Close your eyes for one minute, then reopen them and sit in silence for one more minute.

...Take time to note anything that may come to you.

...Give thanks as appropriate.

Finish with the Lord's Prayer.

### Other resources

Find out more about the Transfiguration at:

[http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyril\\_on\\_luke\\_05\\_sermons\\_47\\_56.htm#SERMON%20LI](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyril_on_luke_05_sermons_47_56.htm#SERMON%20LI)

St Cyril of Alexandria, Sermon LI

# The Mystery of Sin, Suffering and Hope

## READINGS

- **Isaiah 55.1-9**
- **Psalm 63.1-9**
- **1 Corinthians 10.1-13**
- **Luke 13. 1-9**

## STARTING OUT

### The mystery of sin



“

*Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit  
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden...*

”

So begins John Milton's famous poem *Paradise Lost*. His subject is that extraordinary mystery, the broken relationship between human beings and the loving creator God.

We first get our understanding of sin from the book of Genesis, where we are told of the first disobedience in the Garden of Eden. God offers the first humans, Adam and Eve, everything they desire from the garden, but not fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But Adam and Eve stop listening to God and listen instead to the voice of temptation, putting what they want before God's desire for them. Once they take the fruit from the tree the relationship of trust and love with God is broken, they know they have broken away from God and they can no longer live as before in the beautiful world of God's intention.

So this story asks us: do we recognise ourselves here? If we think about ourselves as humans we can identify with Adam and Eve after the 'Fall'; we are creatures who easily follow our own desires and ignore our conscience: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us' (1 John 1:8). But sometimes we ignore the continuing story of the Book of Genesis. The wonderful mystery is that God goes with Adam and Eve and guides them and their descendants in their struggles and on their journey through history. God never abandons them. And in this is a tremendous hope. In the readings today we hear songs of praise and hope amid the disorder and suffering of the world. And where will we ultimately find this hope? That is what we must discover on our continuing Lenten journey with Jesus.

## SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

### Sin, suffering and hope



“

- Do you agree with this account of sin? How else might we think about the Garden of Eden story? How might the Garden of Eden story have been misused or misunderstood?
- How would you talk with someone who says that a good God would not allow the world to be in the state it is in today?
- Many people today think 'sin' is just a word for wrongdoing. How would you explain to them what sin means in a Christian context? Why is sin 'deadly'?
- What sort of gifts do you think God gives us to make a difference to the pain of the world?

”



## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

### How we hurt others and ourselves



“

The first time I got stopped by the police and fined for drink driving I felt pretty hard done by. I wasn't that much over the limit, I told myself. I felt fine. Loads of other people do worse. So I started drinking and driving a bit more, just to prove to myself that I really was ok and it was unfair that I got stopped. I was upsetting my wife who didn't want to get in the car with me if I'd been drinking, and I knew I shouldn't upset her, but I didn't care, I still wanted to 'prove' that I was ok and I was in control.

One night, after the pub, I got in my car and was driving home when I heard a bang. I stopped and got out. I had hit a cyclist. I got out and realised it was my neighbour across the street. I picked him up, put his mangled bike in the car and helped him into the front seat. I was shaking from fright, but most of it was for myself, instead of for him. He said he was ok and he just wanted to go home. I was so relieved that he didn't want to call the police or go to hospital.

I told my wife what had happened and she was disgusted with me and said my neighbour could have been killed because of my behaviour. The next day I went round to see my neighbour and was horrified at the bruises on his arms and legs, I was deeply upset at having caused his suffering, but I was still mainly concerned for myself. I promised to replace his bike. He just looked at me and said, 'you'd been drinking'. 'Yes' I said. 'Then promise me you will never do it again'. I promised, but inside I thought I probably would do it again. And I did. I still do.

”

- What do you think this story tells us about the way we sin?
- What might it take for the person to change?
- How do you think the person's wife and neighbour feel about him carrying on the same way? What help does he need?
- What signs of hope are there in this story?



*Jesus releases Adam and Eve*

15th-16th century Passional, National Library of Wales

## SOME SCRIPTURE TO PONDER

### The barren fig tree



*Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."*

**Luke 13.6-9**

One way of interpreting this mysterious parable is that Jesus suggests that God actively comes looking for our spiritual flourishing within the Creation but that we are found wanting. As the gardener, Jesus offers us the way to salvation. If we attend to Jesus we will find the way to bear the fruit God longs for. But if we don't, we have wasted all that God has invested in us.

- Jesus gives a stark message: repent or perish! Why do you think his message is so direct?
- What do you think the 'fruit' should be?

## SOMETHING TO DO



Have a look at this video about hope  
(1 min 30):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMszMvhS\\_p0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMszMvhS_p0)

- Where in the Gospels do you hear Jesus telling us about God's plan for human beings?
- What ONE practical thing could your church do to bring hope and joy to your community?



## SOMETHING TO PRAY



*God, our guide and shepherd,*

We wander away from you like lost sheep.  
Sometimes we can't remember  
where we are supposed to go.  
The path gets blurred, we turn aside  
from the places you have made for us  
to keep us safe, to guide us.

Sometimes we end up hurt in a ditch.  
Sometimes we lead others astray.  
Sometimes we simply suffer.

Yet we have hope.  
We know you will come and find us  
You will forgive us our trespasses.  
You will forgive our sins.

Amen

### For a prayerful meditation:

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner  
(The Jesus Prayer)*

*Forgive us our sins and renew us by your grace, that we may  
continue to grow as members of Christ, in whom alone is  
our salvation. Amen.*

## ENTERING THE MYSTERY

### God so loved the world



St Ambrose, meditating on the mystery of sin, suffering and hope, thinks about the story of Noah and the Ark to explain how God forgives human sin.

*God, willing to restore what was lacking, sent the flood and bade just Noah go up into the ark. And he, after having, as the flood was passing off, sent forth first a raven which did not return, sent forth a dove which is said to have returned with an olive twig. You see the water, you see the wood [of the ark], you see the dove, and do you hesitate as to the mystery?*

*The water, then, is that in which the flesh is dipped, that all carnal sin may be washed away. All wickedness is there buried. The wood is that on which the Lord Jesus was fastened when He suffered for us. The dove is that in the*





*form of which the Holy Spirit descended, as you have read in the New Testament, Who inspires in you peace of soul and tranquillity of mind. The raven is the figure of sin, which goes forth and does not return, if, in you, too, inwardly and outwardly righteousness be preserved. (On the Mysteries)*

In a startling image, St Ambrose thinks of human sin as the raven which is released from the Ark and does not come back. The world is full of human wickedness which needs to be redeemed. So the story tells of God acting directly to enable human beings to change the world and to be saved. God does not save Noah, Noah has to listen and turn to God to be saved.

For St Ambrose, the water of baptism declares us God's people and the Jesus on the wood of the Cross is our salvation, our safe ark. As the raven of all our sin flies away never to return, the dove of peace comes to us with its olive branch, and the Spirit directs our lives. So the Noah story is one of tremendous hope and promise and full of God's love.

The purpose of the Lenten journey is to come face to face with that mystery of the Cross and to know its relevance for us in a world still damaged by sin and suffering today.

- Where do you see stories of hope in the world today?
- What do you make of St Ambrose's meditation on the Noah story?

## SOMEWHERE TO GO

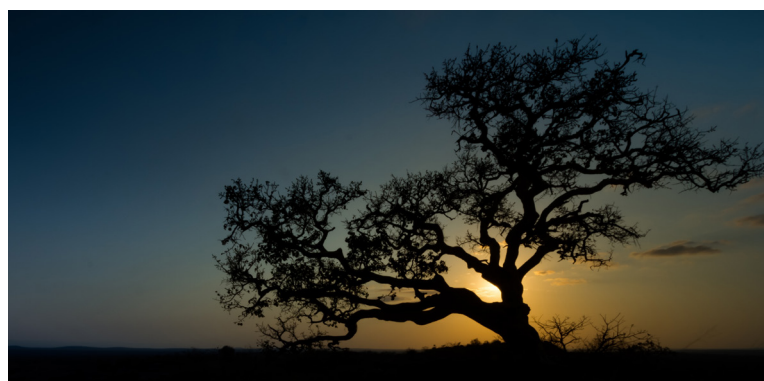
### Entering the Mystery



Now be with the people listening to Jesus talk about the barren fig tree:

- ...Sit in silence and leave distractions behind.
- ...Concentrate on quiet breathing.
- ...Think about the fig tree growing in the soil, its branches empty of fruit.
- ...Think about the gardener believing in the tree, nurturing it, loving it.
- ...watering and feeding it in hope.
- ...what will the vineyard owner find when he comes again looking for fruit?
- ...Find one picture or one word or one simple phrase from the resource so far.
- ...Holding that picture, word or phrase in your mind.
- ...Reach out to the mystery and wonder that is God tending each one of us, hoping for us,
- ...forgiving our sins when we are without fruit, rejoicing when we change, grow and flower.
- ...Close your eyes for one minute, then reopen them and sit in silence for one more minute.
- ...Take time to note anything that may come to you.
- ...Give thanks as appropriate.

Finish with the Lord's Prayer.



### Other resources

Read more from St Ambrose at

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3405.htm>

More about the Jesus Prayer at

<https://www.orthodoxprayer.org/Jesus%20Prayer.html>

# The Mystery of Relationship and Reconciliation

Photo: Flickr/ Liz Furze

## READINGS

- **Joshua 5:9-12**
- **Psalm 32**
- **2 Corinthians 5:16-21**
- **Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

## STARTING OUT

### The Others in our Lives



A therapy called 'Human Sculpting' is often used with families as a way of visualising relationships, but it can also be used as a form of theological reflection to help people see the complexity and web of our personal and spiritual relationships. How it works is to take a scenario – a real life situation like going into hospital for instance, or a Bible story – and to think about all the people who might be involved in such a scenario, no matter how distantly. In a hospital scenario, that might mean the patient, their family, nurses, doctors, therapists, others on the ward, tea providers, taxi drivers, the hospital chaplain, the parish priest and all the church family praying for the person. Lots of people are somehow involved with the patient and with each other.

The group members position themselves as one of the characters in the scenario and decide where to stand, sit or kneel in relation to each other. Once everyone has put themselves in position every person is invited to look around at the web of relationships. Nothing has to be said; it's not role play.

The exercise is done several times as the scenario develops – who else do you need to be close to, or further away from? Who is dominating the scene, blocking the view of others? Who is left out? Who is being taken into the heart of the sculpture? Gradually people change places and each time there is a pause to

look at who is inside and who is on the outside. Once the exercise has been done a few times, the group 'freezes' and takes time to absorb the final web of relationships. People are then invited to review where they were and whether they wanted to move or not.

All kinds of issues emerge about power, loss, separation, divided loyalties, inclusion and exclusion, faith, care, danger, loneliness and so on. Surprising things can be revealed, especially who is affected by the scenario. It often makes people realise just how complex our relationships are and how we relate to people around us daily. What keeps the relationships together or drives them apart? As a form of theological reflection, there is another perspective to the final form of the sculpture, when we begin to ask: where is God?

## SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

### Different relationships



“

- In the hospital scenario suggested above, how many different sorts of relationship can you think of?
- What other kinds of relationships do we have beyond those we have with other people? What about objects, houses, pets, wealth?
- How do you think our relationships with our neighbours, our families and others affect our relationship with God? How would you talk about that with someone who was not a Christian?

”



## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

### Broken hearts



Stories:

“

My parents split up when I was a baby and I never saw my dad. When I asked my mum, she just got upset so I didn't ask questions, but I kept wondering who he was. When I went to school and my friends asked where my dad was, I made up stories about him. He was an explorer who discovered new snakes in the jungle; he was a famous actor; he was a war artist; he was an undercover agent. I got a lot of ideas from films and TV. My friends didn't believe me so I wrote myself letters and postcards from him, which were exciting and loving. Gradually, I let go of the stories, but I kept the letters. I always used to end with 'looking forward to seeing you soon, love dad'. I never did meet my dad, but I used to read the letters as a sort of prayer that he was ok, that he had a family and that one day I would meet him.

”

“

When I was 16 I fell in love with a boy at school. The thing was, my parents wanted me to stay away from boys as they wanted me to marry someone they thought was suitable from our own extended family when I was older. But you can't help who you love, can you? The more they worried about me staying away from boys, the more I wanted to see him and spend time with him. So I lied to my family, which really hurt, and I went a lot further with the boy than I really wanted, because I thought that at any minute we could get split up for ever. Eventually, we got found out and split up and my family was really upset. I cried for weeks. They said it wasn't real love and that when I grew up I would realise that their way was the best thing for me. I love my parents and respect them. But it still hurts. I wish it could have ended a different way. I still love him, even though they say I couldn't have done and never did.

”



Photo: Flickr / Tobias Brixen

- What do you think these two stories tell us about love?
- Both stories are about being apart from people they love. How common is that in our society? What would it take for people to be reconciled or helped to be together? What would reconciliation for these people look like?

## SOME SCRIPTURE TO PONDER

### Being reconciled



Photo: Flickr / Robert Lyle Bolton

*So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring*

on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

**Luke 15.20-24**

- What do you think this story tells us about the nature of God?
- What do you think Jesus' hearers made of the love and reconciliation in this story?

## SOMETHING TO DO

### Seeing relationships differently



Photo: Flickr / joiseyshowaa

Have a look at this video about Sculpting in Family Therapy (2 minutes 23):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYkxxPbnMg8>

- What do you suppose the story of the Prodigal Son would look like as a human sculpture exercise?
- What ONE more thing could you do in your community to create better relationships among different groups of people? How could your church be a focus for reconciliation?

## SOMETHING TO PRAY



*Loving God,*

We know you as Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
You are a mystery of wonderful relationship,  
Creating, Redeeming, Sustaining,  
Reconciling the world to yourself  
And making new.

Amen

### For a prayerful meditation:

*Prayer brings together two lovers, God and the soul, in a narrow room where they speak much of love .*

(The Cloud of Unknowing)

## THE MYSTERY OF GOD

### God's Longing for us and Reconciliation



In the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament), we sometimes hear about God as utterly beyond human comprehension and experience. 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts' (Isaiah 55.8-9).

This makes God sound essentially unknowable, so far beyond human reason and imagination that the mystery of God is impenetrable, so that we can only respond with awe, wonder and silence. What would we have to say to God, whose thoughts and actions are so far beyond us?

When Job ponders on human existence, God stuns him with the amazing miracle of creation, so much vaster and more incredible than a human lifetime: 'where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?' (Job 38.4). We can only know 'the outskirts of his ways' (Job 26.14). We can only ever scratch the merest surface of the mystery that is God.

Many theologians and Christians following the mystical tradition, such as St John of the Cross and the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, have followed this 'apophatic' tradition, contemplating the mystery of God which is always greater than human knowing and through which more is always being revealed.



In other places in the Hebrew Scriptures though, we come across different ways to describe God. Sometimes God's power comes to the fore as a king or a judge or a warrior, but in other places God is imagined as a nurturer, a shepherd or a gardener, or as a parent, as a woman in labour in Isaiah 42.14 or as a father:

'I thought how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me' (Jeremiah 3.19).

But one of the most extraordinary things Jesus did in his life and ministry was to tell his friends that they could relate to the mystery that is God, by going beyond metaphors and likenesses to being in immediate, intimate relationship with God. Is this what Jesus realised when he stayed behind in the Temple, in 'his Father's house'?

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples and followers to call God 'Abba', (father) and teaches about God not just in terms of metaphor but active relationship. To call God Abba, expresses trust, honour, respect, and confidence in that relationship.

Through Jesus we discover that God longs for us, searches us out, rejoices in us and brings us home. To be out of this relationship is the utmost abandonment and desolation, as we see in the story of Dives and Lazarus, in the destitution of the Prodigal Son and in Jesus's own cry of despair from the cross.

And in his death and resurrection, Jesus makes sure that relationship with God is never lost to us – if we offer ourselves to that relationship. We can always go home to where God waits for us. So St Paul can say, 'For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8.38-39).

- If you say the Nicene Creed slowly and carefully, thinking about each section, what do you learn about God as Trinity and God in relation to human beings?
- How do you think people reflect the love of God to others through their own relationships?



Photo: Flickr / brilliantthues

## SOMEWHERE TO GO

### Entering the Mystery



Imagine the life of the Prodigal Son:

...Sit in silence and leave distractions behind.

...Concentrate on quiet breathing.

...Imagine the wonderful life of riches and pleasure  
...everything you could ever want...

...imagine it all falling away, until you are empty

...who will you turn to? Who will forgive you?

...who is waiting for you to come home?

...Find one picture or one word or one simple phrase  
from the resource so far.

...Holding that picture, word or phrase in your mind.

...Reach out to the mystery and wonder that is God.

...Close your eyes for one minute, then reopen them and  
sit in silence for one more minute.

...Take time to note anything that may come to you.

...Give thanks as appropriate.

Finish with the Lord's Prayer.

### Other resources

The Nicene Creed, read prayerfully by different voices:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86zf1i1qBDC>

# *The Mystery of Parenthood and Adoption (Mothering Sunday)*

Photo: Flickr/ Infinite Ache

## READINGS

- **Exodus 2.1-10 or Samuel 1.20-18**
- **Psalms 34.11-20 or Psalm 127.1-4**
- **2 Corinthians 1.3-7 or Colossians 3.12-17**
- **Luke 2.33-35 or John 19.25-27**

## STARTING OUT

### When Mothering Sunday is difficult

In many of our churches, children are invited to give flowers or cards to their mothers on Mothering Sunday. It's an enjoyable celebration of family and family life in the middle of Lent.

But what if you haven't got a mother? What if your mother has died? What about if you have a difficult or abusive relationship with your mother? What about if it's your father or grandparents who look after you? What does that feel like if you're in church with all that joy and celebration going on around you?

And what about if you have been adopted or if you have a biological mother who doesn't live with you because you were born through IVF or surrogacy? How might that complicate Mothering Sunday? And how does all this relate to the Holy Family, or to the idea of the Church as a Mother?

The creation of a new and reconciled family under God is a key idea in the New Testament. Jesus himself asks, 'who is my mother and who are my brothers?' (Matthew

12.48) when his own family is trying to reach him and get him to leave with them. Instead, Jesus says that his family is whoever does the will of the Father. So St Paul says, 'He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will' (Ephesians 1.5). Jesus teaches us to pray with the words 'Our Father...' Family, faith and God's will for us seem to be intertwined.

So on this Sunday in Lent, as we continue to journey with Jesus, we look more closely at the mystery of parenthood in all its forms, at the parenthood of God and at adoption as a means of talking about the mystery of salvation: 'but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies' (Romans 8.23).

## SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

### Fathers and Mothers

- “
- 'Honour thy Father and thy Mother' is one of the Commandments. How would you start a conversation with someone who can't find anything to honour in their parents?
  - How would you talk with someone about the idea of adoption in Romans?
  - Some people stay away from church on Mothering Sunday because it's so painful. How could churches make accommodation for people who find Mothering Sunday difficult?
  - What would a 'Fathering Sunday' feel like?
- ”

## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

### Loving, unloving and unlovable



Stories:

“

When she died it was as though a chain around my ankles had been shattered, and I was set free. I shocked myself when I visited the funeral home to view her corpse, because I found myself unable to do anything else but to laugh – a cathartic response to years of repressed anger and grief of a parent I never really had. Jeanette Winterson in describing her childhood spoke of her adoptive mother as a monster “but she was my monster”. One can never be severed completely from those who parented us.

Now that I am a parent myself, I find it impossible to understand why any parent would ever treat their child this way. But as the father of an adopted child, whose own birth mother treated him in shocking ways, I have a bond with him which I find strangely and wonderfully redemptive. Indeed, the notion of God as “Father” (something which hitherto had never resonated with me) has found new level of authenticity.

”

“

One of the teenage children I fostered had very complex care needs. He had been in and out of care for a long, long time. Every day brought new challenges, even something like going to the supermarket could turn into something from a disaster movie if he got upset and had a meltdown. He was tall and strong and every ounce of my energy had to be put into calming him, reassuring him and making sure the other children were all right.

People would shake their heads looking at the spilt milk and the vegetables strewn across the aisles and say, ‘he shouldn’t be allowed out’ and ‘you could never love a child like that’. But they were wrong. We loved him all the more because he couldn’t love us back. We never hid him away or left him behind because it was easy. And even though I’d never get a Mother’s Day card from him, the peace I felt when he became calm and came back to us was better than any words.

”

- How do you feel about these two stories?
- How do you think these stories give us insight into the mystery of parental love and of God’s love for us?

## SOME SCRIPTURE TO PONDER

### Jesus creates a new family from the Cross



*Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ 27 Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.*

**John 19.25-27**

As Jesus dies, he ensures that his disciple will look after his mother. They are to be mother and son to one another.



Photo: Flickr / Naotake Murayama



- What do you think this tells us about God's love for us?
- Why do you think Jesus said they were to be as mother and son? Why didn't he just say, 'take care of my mother?'
- In the course of your own life who are the 'adopted' members of your own family – friends, neighbours, pets, colleagues?
- People sometimes say 'he was like a second father to me', or 'she was the mother I never had'. What do you think that means? And what does that tell us about parenthood?

## SOMETHING TO DO



Krish Kandiah, Director and Founder, Home for Good

Have a look at the video from Home for Good, or listen to Nathan and Ruby's stories in the AdoptionPlus video (3 min 07 and 1 min 35):

<https://vimeo.com/235313835>

<http://adoptionplus.co.uk/thinking-about-adopting>

- What do you learn from these stories and how do they make you feel?



## SOMETHING TO PRAY



Father and Daughter, Flickr / Anthony Kelly

*Loving God,  
You are the parent of all creation  
Your Spirit hovered over the face of the waters,  
You breathed your breath of life into humankind.  
You protect us like a mother hen gathers her chicks,  
You long for us like a father waiting for a homecoming.  
We are restless and lost without you.*

Through your Son, Jesus Christ, who died for us,  
We know we are your family.  
You, who seek to adopt all who search for you  
Who makes us heirs of your salvation. *Amen*

### For a prayerful meditation:

*When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.*

## THE MYSTERY OF GOD

### God adopts us



From Pope Francis's homily at his inauguration Mass 19th March 2013:

*How does Joseph exercise his role as protector? Discreetly, humbly and silently, but with an unfailing presence and utter fidelity, even when he finds it hard to understand... How does Joseph respond to his calling to be the protector of Mary, Jesus and the Church? By being constantly attentive to God, open to the signs of God's presence and receptive to God's plans, and not simply to his own...*

*Joseph is a “protector” because he is able to hear God’s voice and be guided by his will; and for this reason he is all the more sensitive to the persons entrusted to his safekeeping. He can look at things realistically, he is in touch with his surroundings, he can make truly wise decisions. In him, dear friends, we learn how to respond to God’s call, readily and willingly...*

In thinking about the Holy Family, prominence is often given to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her child who is our Saviour. But what about Joseph? When Mary became pregnant, he thought long and hard about casting her off, but was obedient to God in marrying her and ‘adopting’ Jesus as his own son. Pope Francis asks us to reconsider what that cost and what qualities were involved in taking that decision and committing himself to being Jesus’ parent. We do not hear much about Joseph in the gospels. He is in the background offering Jesus the tools of his trade, doing God’s will by raising Jesus to be devout, and obedient to God’s will, just as he was. Is it Joseph’s example that resonates with Jesus when he struggles in Gethsemane? So when we think more deeply about the mystery of God, God’s parenthood and adoption on Mothering Sunday, what else does that imply for how we go out into the world?

Pope Francis continues:

*The vocation of being a “protector”, ... means respecting each of God’s creatures and respecting the environment in which we live. It means protecting people, showing loving concern for each and every person, especially children, the elderly, those in need, who are often the last we think about. It means caring for one another in our families: husbands and wives first protect one another, and then, as parents, they care for their children, and children themselves, in time, protect their parents. It means building sincere friendships in which we protect one another in trust, respect, and goodness.*

Church of the nativity, Bethlehem. Flickr / xiquinhosilva



- What can we learn from the example of St Joseph on Mothering Sunday?
- What **one** thing could we change in our own church to show more of this love to the world?

## ENTERING THE MYSTERY

### Mary and John



Now be with Mary as she goes to John’s house...

...Sit in silence and leave distractions behind.

...Concentrate on quiet breathing.

...this is your family now. You are loved, despite your grief.

...you are all in danger and afraid. You do not know what will happen next.

...Simeon’s prophecy has come true. You are broken hearted.

...and yet... you hope.

...Find one picture or one word or one simple phrase from the resource so far.

...Holding that picture, word or phrase in your mind.

...Reach out to the mystery and wonder that is God.

...who gives you strength to face danger and fear, to accept adoption and love.

...Close your eyes for one minute, then reopen them and sit in silence for one more minute.

...Take time to note anything that may come to you.

...Give thanks as appropriate.

Finish with the Lord’s Prayer.

### Other resources

Mothers’ Union Mothering Sunday resources including liturgies which acknowledge the difficulties some have with Mothering Sunday

<https://www.mothersunion.org/mothering-sunday-resources>



WEEK 5

# The Mystery of Love and Sacrifice



## READINGS

- **Isaiah 43.16-21**
- **Psalm 126**
- **Philippians 3.4b-14**
- **John 12.1-8**

## STARTING OUT

### To die that we may live



One of the most well-known verses in the gospels is John's assertion in John 3.16: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life'. This is how God's love for us is supremely expressed, that God sends us God's own self in Jesus, so that we can truly relate to him, because Jesus is a human being like us. Through the New Testament we learn

© Brooklyn Museum



more about the mystery of God through Jesus, as, by word and deed, he reveals more about who God is and what God wants for us.

But God's love goes much further than this. It's not just about learning how to live and how to understand the world, it is about turning ourselves around to be people who actively work with God to create God's kingdom and to be with God after our lives are done. We have to learn to die to ourselves and our selfish wants. We have to learn to sacrifice. For that destiny to be real for us, barriers of brokenness, disorder and sin have to be destroyed.

We cannot do it by ourselves. But Jesus can, and does. His life, God's life in the world, is willingly sacrificed on the cross. And we have seen what a great mystery it is, when Christians and other people of faith in all times and places, have sacrificed their lives for others.

## SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

### Who would you die for?



“

- Lots of popular love songs swear, 'I'd die for you'. Who do you love enough to die for?
- How do you think your church could really show love and sacrifice for others?
- How would you start a conversation with someone about 'God so loved the world..?'
- How can we live out Jesus's love and sacrifice in our own lives?

”



## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

### Love and Sacrifice



#### Stories:

“

Jack and Phyllis Potter had been married for more than 70 years and both were more than 90 years old. But Phyllis was in a care home and suffering from dementia. Jack, though, had kept a diary from the moment he met her at a dance all those years ago and visited every day to read to her from the history of their marriage, to keep those memories alive and to remind her of his love for her.

<http://femalemag.com.my/relationships-sex/real-life-notebook-couple-celebrates-70th-anniversary/>

”

“

Two teenagers were going to see a film they'd wanted to see for months. But their mother asked them to go and visit their gran in hospital because she couldn't go. Alia grumbled but said she would go, but she didn't. Binita moaned at her mother and complained that she'd wanted to see the film for ages. But when she started off with her sister, she started thinking about her gran and changed her mind and went to the hospital after all. (Compare Matthew 21.28-31)

”

- What do you think is the most loving thing you can do for another person?
- Where do you see people sacrificing their own wants for love?
- Where do you see devotion and sacrifice in these two stories?

## SOME SCRIPTURE TO PONDER

### Extravagance and love



*Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

#### John 12.3

Have you ever broken a bottle of perfume or cologne, or maybe just gone into the bathroom after a young person has been getting ready for a party! Concentrated scents can take your breath away. You can smell the rich scent for days. In this scene, the hospitality of eating and drinking at the house in Bethany is overwhelmed by Mary's sacrifice of a costly fragrance with which she anoints Jesus's feet as for his burial.

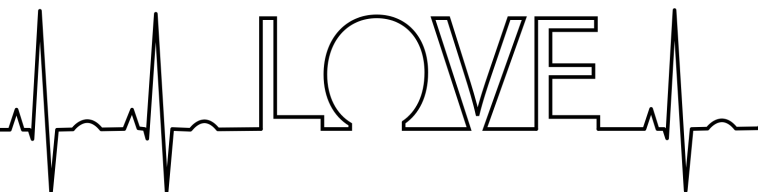
When we know those we love are going to leave us, or are approaching the end of their lives, it makes us re-evaluate all our priorities. What's the last thing we can do to show our love? Surely, things like money should become the least of our problems or concerns. And yet how often we wait until the person is dead and then put our extravagance into the funeral – the flowers, the coffin and the wake.

Mary does not wait, much to Judas' disgust. She pours out the perfume to show her love for him. And Jesus pours out his life for us. God shows his extravagant love for us.



- Judas was angry. What do you think Martha and Lazarus thought about Mary's actions?
- What do you think is the significance of the cost of the perfume and Mary's act of anointing Jesus?
- How can we show more of our love to those we care about?
- If we say we love God, why don't we sacrifice more of what we have to show that love?

## SOMETHING TO DO



Have a look at this video about nurses (2 mins 18):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URlKV0ewrhM>

- What do we learn about love and sacrifice from the caring professions?
- What ONE thing could be changed to show more love and sacrifice in your church?
- How can we appreciate and support people who sacrifice themselves to care for others?

## SOMETHING TO PRAY



### *Loving God*

All too often, we come to the tomb too late, bearing our spices, our final gifts, our loves all the things we never said, the promises, the things we were going to get around to.



Yet you gave us your Son that we might have eternal life.  
Jesus poured out his life as Mary poured perfume.  
We are drenched in your love, it cannot be stopped.  
We know that we do not deserve it.

Help us not to leave love too late.  
Teach us to show our love not hoard it.  
Help us to be worthy of the sacrifice.

*Amen*

### **For a prayerful meditation:**

*And who am I, that for my sake, my love should take frail flesh and die?*

## THE MYSTERY OF GOD

### God so Loved the World



*'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.'*

**1 John 4.7-12**

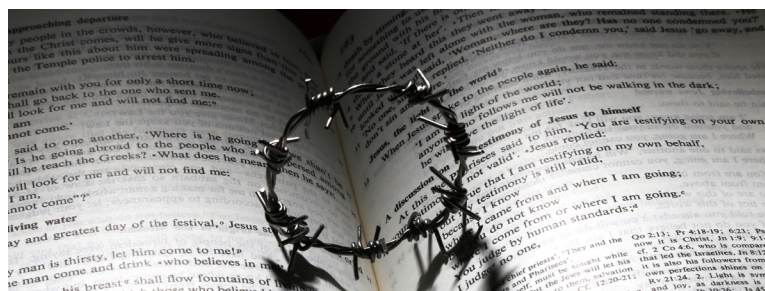
This passage of Scripture reminds us that travelling the Lenten journey with Jesus is more than just getting together and having a time of fellowship and study. Entering into the mystery of God's love confronts us with a shocking truth – if we say we believe in God and in Jesus then we have to truly believe that God loves us enough to send Jesus to die for us. More than this, we have to show that love ourselves. If we don't, the mystery of God's own love for us cannot be made known to other people.

Do we, as Christians, truly love one another? That is a tremendous challenge, not least because there are many faithful Christians who have been hurt by their church, their Christian neighbours and friends. It's not a new issue; St Paul's letters set out his requests to people in churches to spend more time witnessing through Christian love, rather than arguing, fighting and misbehaving.

Yet the world is desperate for messages of God's love. And if the Lenten journey into the mystery of God means anything, it is that we will emerge from it with a stronger, clearer conviction of who God is and what God has done for us. And that means showing it to others in our own congregations and fellowships. It's often harder than we think; there are so many issues diluting our love, making it conditional, or sparing. What would it take to show love to the people we usually avoid, to make room for people who are least like us, to pour out, extravagantly, God's love on those who would be shocked and surprised to receive it?

- What ONE thing could you do, as a church, to overwhelm your community with God's love?

Photo: Flickr / Hernán Piñera



## ENTERING THE MYSTERY

### God's Son will die



Now be with Mary as she brings the jar of perfume to Jesus...

...Sit in silence and leave distractions behind.

...Concentrate on quiet breathing.

...You look at Jesus...

...You see that God so loved the world that he has sent his Son to die for you and for all.

...You are part of that story.

...You break the seal on the costly jar. Judas gasps.

... You pour out the perfume. Jesus looks at you and knows what you are doing.

... The scent fills and fills the room. You know that Jesus will give his life for you.

... This is how you anoint him for burial.

...Find one picture or one word or one simple phrase from the resource so far.

...Holding that picture, word or phrase in your mind

...Reach out to the mystery and wonder that is God

...whose nature is a pouring out of Love

...Close your eyes for one minute, then reopen them and sit in silence for one more minute.

...Take time to note anything that may come to you...

Give thanks as appropriate.

Finish with the Lord's Prayer.

### Other resources

Burial Practices in First Century Palestine

<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/people/related-articles/burial-practices-in-first-century-palestine>



# The Mystery of Joy and Salvation

Palm Sunday



Photo: Flickr/ goser le goserien

## READINGS

- **Isaiah 50.4-9a**
- **Psalm 31.9-16**
- **Philippians 2.5-11**
- **Luke 22.14-23.56**  
**or Luke 23.1-49**

## STARTING OUT

### Hosanna!



When Jesus entered into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, people flocked to him with joy. They were most likely hoping for the Messiah, God's liberator, who would free them from the Roman occupation. They were filled with hope and excitement, looking into their religious texts and history for confirmation that this person, here and now, would be the one to bring freedom, autonomy and a better life for all. The Messiah would be the source of their salvation. No wonder they shouted Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

We all understand the excitement of that kind of personal hope. Newspapers offer us pictures of people beaming as they pop champagne corks – they have won the lottery, or won Strictly. Or their joy comes from intimacy and relationship: people got married, had a baby, or found a sibling they never knew they had. Sometimes joy emerges from heartache and is all the more sweet for the turning round of people's fortunes. But sometimes the euphoria changes to indifference, or even misery. Sometimes, joy just doesn't last.

But the people who shouted Hosanna could not have imagined the kind of joy waiting at the end of the story. Because it's a story that turns from cries of joy to cries of hatred and disappointment: 'Crucify him!'



Photo: Flickr / Richard Gillin

And here we reach the greatest mystery of faith; a truly mysterious Joy and Salvation for all people are waiting at the end of the grief and suffering of the Holy Week story. Only God can create such endless and indestructible joy out of defeat, death, loss and terrible spiritual void.

## SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

### Are we joyful enough?



- “
- What comes to mind when you think of a joyful occasion in your life?
  - How does your church celebrate and show joy?
  - How would you start a conversation with someone about the joy to be found in Christian life and faith?
  - Why aren't we more joyful and thankful about the salvation God has brought to us in Jesus Christ?
- ”

## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

### Joy and peace beyond our understanding



“

Jonathan Bryan, the son of Rev'd Christopher Bryan and Chantal Bryan was severely brain damaged after a car accident when his mother was pregnant. He is, in the eyes of the world, extremely disabled and cannot speak. However, he learned to communicate by eye gaze and has written a book called *Eye Can Write*.

Jonathan has nearly died a number of times, but he tells a mysterious and wonderful story of how he had a crisis. As death neared, he found himself in a wonderful garden with other children and Jesus. Since he could not then communicate, he could not tell his parents or other people about it. Once he became able to write, he shared that he was not afraid of death and looked forward to the joy, peace and liberation he had experienced. Since then, Jonathan does not fear death and although he expects his life to be short looks forward to his life with Jesus his Saviour.

”

Find out more about Jonathan at:

<https://eyecantalk.net/>

“

In the medieval dream vision called *The Pearl*, the dreamer finds his dead daughter again in a beautiful garden filled with light, but he cannot join her. He has to go back and live out his life. But heaven awaits.

”

- What do you think a person like Jonathan can teach us about joy?
- What do you make of Jonathan's vision of the beautiful garden?



Photo: Flickr / Suzanne Berton

## SOME SCRIPTURE TO PONDER

### Trust in God's salvation



*Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress...*

*But I trust in you, O Lord;  
I say, 'You are my God.'  
My times are in your hand;  
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.*

*Let your face shine upon your servant;  
save me in your steadfast love.*

**Psalm 31. 9; 14-16**

- Do we trust God enough to put ourselves fully in God's hands?
- How will your church prepare to enter again into the Holy Week story and the Easter mystery?
- When has God answered your prayers when you have been upset or troubled?



## SOMETHING TO DO



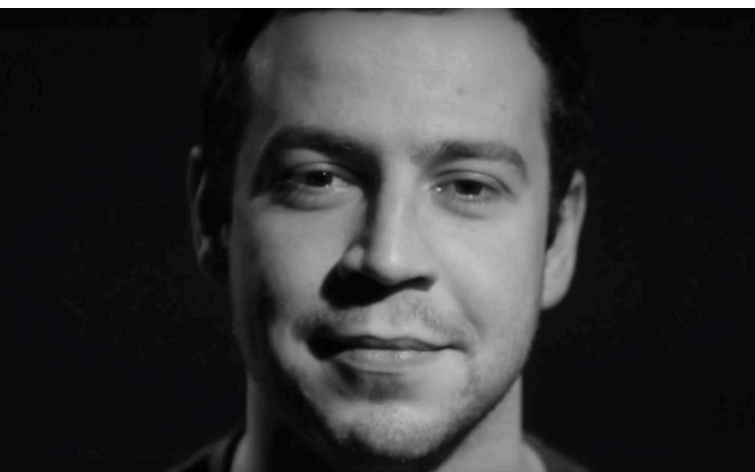
Have a look at this video on 'Human Joy' from Fran O'Hanlon, aka Ajimal (3mins 58):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQQIxVztErA>

The lyrics are here:

<https://ajimal.bandcamp.com/track/this-human-joy>

- What do the lyrics/video make you think about joy?
- What ONE thing could your church do to bring more joy to your community?



## SOMETHING TO PRAY



*Loving God of our Salvation*

we come to you filled with joy  
because, when we least expected it,  
when we thought the story was ended  
and there was nothing but failure and tears,  
you sent your Son, Jesus,  
to die on a cross and bring us home.

Help us to show our joy to the world  
that we may witness to your Love  
rejoicing in our Salvation.

*Amen*



Photo: Flickr / muffinn

**For a prayerful meditation:**

*Lord, I believe in your steadfast love...*

*Bless the Lord all you works of the Lord: sing his praise and exalt him for ever. (Benedicite)*

Meditation for Palm Sunday:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTXiqoGnbKU>

## THE MYSTERY OF GOD

### God so Loved the World



*'...suddenly the Trinity fulfilled my heart most of joy. And so I understood it shall be in heaven without end to all that shall come there. For the Trinity is God: God is the Trinity; the Trinity is our Maker and Keeper, the Trinity is our everlasting love and everlasting joy and bliss, by our Lord Jesus Christ. And this was shewed in the First [Shewing] and in all: for where Jesus appeareth, the blessed Trinity is understood, as to my sight.*

*And I said: Benedicite Domine! This I said for reverence in my meaning, with mighty voice; and full greatly was astonished for wonder and marvel that I had, that He that is so reverend and dreadful will be so homely with a sinful creature living in wretched flesh.'*

**Mother Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, chapter 4.**

Mother Julian describes being filled with joy when she enters the Mystery of God. She sees that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit and Jesus is all that God is. She encounters the awe and the beauty of God. She marvels that God should care so much about her that God should have made it possible for us to be saved for everlasting life.

That brings the Lenten journey back to its beginning. We began with the recognition that we know that we are born and that we will die: we are dust. But the end of our story, is, by the grace of God, life not death. That is where we are going, with Jesus, into the mystery of death to discover the everlasting life that awaits us and where God will wipe every tear from our eyes.

## ENTERING THE MYSTERY

### Who is this Jesus?



Now stand in the crowd as Jesus enters Jerusalem

...Sit in silence and leave distractions behind.

...Concentrate on quiet breathing.

...There is so much noise, everyone is excited.

...Is this the Messiah? Everyone wants to believe.

...They are crying out, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

...So much joy, but so much more to come...

...Find one picture or one word or one simple phrase from the resource so far.

*Julian of Norwich, photo: Flickr / Matt Brown*



...Holding that picture, word or phrase in your mind.

...Reach out to the mystery and wonder that is God

...and see and know Jesus more clearly...

...Close your eyes for one minute, then reopen them and sit in silence for one more minute.

...Take time to note anything that may come to you...  
Give thanks as appropriate.

Finish with the Lord's Prayer.

### Other resources

Palm Sunday liturgies and prayers from the Iona Community:

<https://www.ionabooks.com/e-liturgies-prayers/palm-sunday.html>



### Entering Holy Week

We hope you have enjoyed this Lenten journey into the Mystery of God. We are now entering Holy Week with Jesus. Let us go forward into the Mystery of the Easter Journey.





Photo: Flickr / Giuseppe Milo

Our Lent course for 2019 delves more deeply into the mystery of God, seeking to rediscover what it is that draws us so deeply in our search for God. We will follow Jesus through the Lenten readings, allowing him to draw us, in love and wonder, into the mystery of God's plan of salvation.

There are eight resources, one for each week of Lent, two extra resources for Ash Wednesday and Palm Sunday, and an alternative resource for Mothering Sunday.

[ctbi.org.uk/lent](http://ctbi.org.uk/lent)

Twitter: #MysteryOfGod

#### How to use the resources

Each resource has different sections, colour coded so that you can choose which parts of the resource to use, depending on what you and/or your group like to do:

- Conversation starters and things to think about
- Prayer and engagement with Scripture
- Something to do – like watch a piece of video and talk about it
- Reflection and devotion

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#### Bible verses

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