

# WALKING WITH THE PROPHETS THROUGH LENT

***Walking with the Prophets through Lent***, a booklet for personal daily devotional prayer and reflection, follows Old Testament readings from the Psalms and the Prophets from the weekday lectionary. The Scripture selection for each day is printed in the booklet. Thoughtful brief notes enrich our response to God. Free from the website.

***Walking with Jesus through Lent*** includes studies for Lent groups for each week of Lent, based on the Sunday gospels for Year C. Studies for Holy Week are based on Servant Songs from Isaiah. Background notes from contributors across the Diocese of Melbourne aid our praying of the text. Free from the website.

***Praying Scripture: Leader's Guide*** contains suggestions for groups using *lectio divina*, Ignatian meditation, the African method of praying Scripture, Puritan meditation, and the Scripture Union method of meditation on Scripture. Also contains resources for groups new to praying Scripture. Free from the website.

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Reflections on the readings written by contributors in 2009

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Daily Personal Readings for Lent Year C

Anglican Diocese of Melbourne 2016

## Daily readings for weekdays in Lent

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**Daily Readings** from the Biblical prophets and the psalms are provided in this booklet for the weekdays of Lent, from Ash Wednesday to the Saturday before Palm Sunday. A separate booklet provides **Weekly Studies** based on the Sunday gospels (Year C), and daily readings from Palm Sunday to Easter Day. A booklet with more information on **Praying Scripture** is also available. These booklets can be downloaded from [melbourne.anglican.com.au](http://melbourne.anglican.com.au)

Each day you are invited to *read* the Scripture text, *reflect* upon it, and *respond* to God in prayer. You may then *remain* quietly soaking in the love of God before *returning* to your everyday life to act upon what you have read.

This method is based on the traditional method of *lectio divina*, or sacred reading, which was developed in the early Christian monastic communities as a way of praying Scripture. *Lectio* has been described as a way of chewing or digesting Scripture so that we taste the flavour and are refreshed and strengthened. In responding and remaining, we move beyond intellectual study of the text to allowing it to become part of our relationship with the Lord. In returning we build our insight into our daily lives.

You can imaginatively enter the text, seeing the scene in ancient Israel, standing beside the first audiences of the psalmists and prophets, listening to the text from their perspective. Then, you can hear the text addressed to yourself in your contemporary setting, and respond prayerfully. This style of reading is commonly called 'Ignatian' meditation, as it was popularised by Ignatius of Loyola in the sixteenth century.

Another style of Scripture reflection is to thoughtfully consider the personal application of the text, 'to see how the matter stands between God and my own soul' (Bishop Ussher). In dialogue with your soul, consider how you might act on the message, then respond to God in prayer. This style of meditation was developed by Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century and used extensively by the Puritans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

## Guidelines for Praying Scripture

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### Preparation

Choose a quiet place and take a minute or two to put aside distractions so that you can focus on your time with the Lord. Some find it helpful to sit in a relaxed posture and to quiet their breathing. Some use a notebook for reflections and prayers.

### 1. Read (*lectio*)

Read through the day's text slowly, attentively and prayerfully. Note anything that particularly stands out to you or draws your attention. You may find it helpful to read the text aloud. You may begin by placing yourself in ancient Israel, hearing the text as the first hearers did.

### 2. Reflect (*meditatio*)

Take a few minutes to ponder the text. Mull over it in your mind, treasuring it in your heart, allowing it to penetrate your soul. The notes provided may aid your reflection. You may jot down some key words or thoughts.

### 3. Respond (*oratio*)

Talk with the Lord about what you have read, and about your reflections and responses to the text. Ask for the deepening of justice in Melbourne and Geelong, for a growth of love and community across our diocese, and that you may walk humbly with God (Micah 6.8).

### 4. Remain (*contemplatio*)

Spend a minute or two in the presence of God, soaking in his love for you. You could play a track from a CD or sit in silence. You might recall a phrase or idea from your reading.

### 5. Return to daily life (*ruminatio* and *evangelizatio*)

Seek to carry your insight or experience out into your everyday world. How will this text and your reflection and prayer impact your daily life? Returning through the day to a short phrase or image may help you to do this.

**Read: Joel 2.1, 12-14**

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.

Yet even now, says the Lord,  
    return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
    rend your hearts and not your clothing.  
Return to the Lord, your God,  
    for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
    and relents from punishing.

**Reflect**

Like a sentry calls an army to immediate action, so Joel sounds a solemn alarm warning his people to be alert, ready to take action now. God is coming to judge his people, and all the world will tremble before him. The prophet's blast of the Shofar, the ram's horn still blown at high Jewish festivals, is meant to raise the people from complacency, to summon them to repentance. Joel charges his people truly to turn to God, rather than just go through the outward motions of piety. He instructs them to rend their hearts and not their clothing as a sign of mourning and repentance, tells them that even the most extravagant outward expressions of grief and lament – "fasting, weeping and mourning" – can never truly be acceptable to God unless they are matched by genuine inner conversion. The people are to make their peace with God, and do so now. Joel's sense of urgency can be sensed throughout his appeal: God is prepared to forgive his people right now, if they also make their decision to follow God right now.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

I think about what it may mean for me to return to God with all my heart, and pray that my inner life may match my public life. I ask for forgiveness for the times when I have put off seeking after God or deliberately ignored his call, and pray that "even now" I may come to know his grace, mercy and love.

**Read: Deuteronomy 30.15-20**

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

**Reflect**

At the end of their long sojourn through the desert—only a stone's throw away from the Promised Land but not quite there yet, Moses calls on his people to affirm with him their joint commitment to God and his promises. "The blessings of God", Moses says, "will be abundant, if you keep faith: you will only truly live when you choose to continue to walk with God". For Moses, this is made all the more urgent since he has been told that he will not cross the Jordan with his people. For him the end of the journey of life, and his pilgrimage has come. As he faces death, he speaks passionately of life—in this short passage he mentions the word 'life' or 'live' six times. Like the people of Israel on the banks of the river Jordan, we too are invited to reject all that denies life and choose instead what is life-giving, life enhancing. This is a choice we make not only for ourselves, but for all generations.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

I consider the things in my own life that make it impossible for me to enjoy life in all its fullness. I pray that I may be given the strength to lay those things aside, and to be able to make space for those things that give life in all its fullness. I pray that I may discern God's will for me, and so come to love and obey him.

Friday 12 February 2016

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**Read: Isaiah 58.5b-9a**

Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?  
Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to ignore your own kin?  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.  
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

### **Reflect**

Fasting involves a change of heart, Isaiah insists, not merely giving up things or refraining from certain foods or drink. Instead, the prophet sets a much larger vision before us. For him, true fasting means to promote those things that build up the kingdom of God, whether in the world at large, in our immediate neighbourhood, or at home. Isaiah combines our inward seeking after God with our care for God's people, by encouraging us to speak up in the cause of justice or to share our surplus with those in need, just as he tells us to love and care for our own families. This Lent is an opportunity to link our own spiritual discipline—our study, prayer and fasting—with actions that will further Isaiah's vision.

### **Respond, Remain, Return**

I pray that I may not close my eyes to the world around me, but underpin my Lenten discipline by action. I pray that I may be given guidance what God seeks me to do to further the work of his kingdom where I live, work and worship. I pray that whenever I need to call on him for help, God will answer, and that my ears will be open to hear his assurance, "Here I am".

Saturday 13 February 2016

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**Read: Isaiah 58.9b-10, 13-14a**

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.  
If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,  
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;  
if you call the sabbath a delight  
and the holy day of the Lord honourable;  
if you honour it, not going your own ways,  
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;  
then you shall take delight in the Lord.

### **Reflect**

The Sabbath is both promise and gift for all of God's creation. People, animals, even the land, are to enjoy their allotted time of rest. Our weekly day of rest foreshadows our eternal rest in the presence of God, and as such belongs to God. Like Jesus, who challenges the legalistic Sabbath observance of his time (Matthew 12.1-14), Isaiah encourages his hearers to delight in this day of rest. By their delight in God's gift of time people express their delight in God, just as by delighting in the things of God on the Sabbath they show their love for God's will. Like fasting in yesterday's passage, keeping the Sabbath is not only a spiritual exercise. Keeping the Sabbath in the way God intended has clear social implications, too. Isaiah demands that strife and evil talk take a rest, and those in need are cared for. When God invites us to receive his gift of rest, he asks that others can freely receive his gift as well, so that all may enjoy a glimpse of what it is like to "take delight in the Lord" when we come to our eternal Sabbath in God's presence.

### **Respond, Remain, Return**

I pray that in the busy-ness of my life, I will take times of rest to spend with God. I pray that I may come to delight in God's gift of rest, and enable others—especially members of my family—to share that gift with me. I pray that God would consecrate today, his Sabbath, for us to be a sign of the promise of eternal life in his presence for ever.

Monday 15 February 2016

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**Read: Leviticus 19.1-2, 11-18**

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord.

You shall not defraud your neighbour; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a labourer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

You shall not render an unjust judgement; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbour: I am the Lord.

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.

### **Reflect**

“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” This is the motto of Leviticus, the verse that summarizes the teaching of the whole book. Leviticus understands that the arena in which we work out the practical implications of holiness is the daily battleground of inter-personal relationships. In the four paragraphs of verses 11-18, we are taught about holiness in the context of human relationships, but in each case we are brought back to the bedrock: “I am the Lord.” So Leviticus teaches us about holiness as we live family life and as we interact with our neighbours. We are challenged to think about the outworking of holiness in our places of employment. We must consider what it means to be holy in relationship with those who are poor, oppressed, marginalized and needy. If all of this were not challenging enough, Jesus challenges us to radically redefine who we think our neighbour is through the story of the Good Samaritan.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Tuesday 16 February 2016

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**Read: Isaiah 55.6-11**

Seek the Lord while he may be found,  
call upon him while he is near;  
let the wicked forsake their way,  
and the unrighteous their thoughts;  
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.  
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.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

### **Reflect**

As I write, Melbourne has enjoyed a few days of refreshing rain so that my garden is looking beautifully green. Isaiah reminds us of God’s grace in the day to day, the sun that shines, the rain that falls, the plants that grow. In just the same way that God’s gracious gift of rain brings growth and life, so God’s gracious gift of his word always achieves its purpose. His gift makes it possible for us to respond to the call of verse 6 with great confidence. We seek God knowing that he may be found; we call on him knowing that he is near. The Lord does not hide from us; he has spoken his word so that he may be found. And because God longs for us to know him he has sent the Living Word, our Lord Jesus, in whom Isaiah’s prophecy is ultimately fulfilled. May our hearts be filled with the sense of joy and expectancy that Isaiah’s words excite in us!

**Respond, Remain, Return**

**Read: Jonah 3.1-10**

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

**Reflect**

The reluctant prophet finally reaches Nineveh, with the smell of fish very much in his nostrils. In one of the great miracle stories of the Old Testament, the whole city responds to Jonah's proclamation of God's word. The mighty King of the Assyrian empire humbles himself before the LORD. Even the animals in the city are covered with sackcloth as a sign of penitence. In his grace, God hears the cries of the people and stays his hand. Nineveh is saved from destruction. The shocking part of the story comes in the next chapter – not the extraordinary repentance of Nineveh, but the hard heartedness of the prophet who is angry with God for his generous grace. The story of Jonah causes us to pause and reflect – are our hearts truly in touch with the mercy, compassion and grace of our Heavenly Father?

**Respond, Remain, Return**

**Read: Psalm 138.1-5**

I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart;  
before the gods I sing your praise;  
I bow down towards your holy temple  
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness;  
for you have exalted your name and your word  
above everything.

On the day I called, you answered me,  
you increased my strength of soul.

All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord,  
for they have heard the words of your mouth.

They shall sing of the ways of the Lord,  
for great is the glory of the Lord.

**Reflect**

David lifts his voice to praise and worship the LORD. He affirms that God and God alone is worthy of all praise and glory and thanks. The LORD is exalted above every other god and over all the kings of the earth. King David longs for a day when every other earthly king will come to God's temple and sing of God's glory.

David's worship of God flows from an understanding of who God is and what he has done in our world. David's hymn of praise is therefore founded on God's character, God's action and God's word. But this is clearly much more than an intellectual affirmation of God's goodness. David has experienced God's personal intervention in the circumstances of his life. He knows that God has answered his prayers. He has experienced the LORD coming alongside him and strengthening his soul.

It is because of these life changing experiences that David sings out with his whole heart and bows down with all of his body. Let us rejoice afresh in our loving God's steadfast love and faithfulness!

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Friday 19 February 2016

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**Read: Ezekiel 18.21-28**

But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? But when the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live? None of the righteous deeds that they have done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which they are guilty and the sin they have committed, they shall die.

Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is unfair.' Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die.

**Reflect**

Ezekiel uses some of the most graphic imagery in the Old Testament to explain the iniquity of God's people. We can be left in no doubt at the appalling stench that our sin causes to God. But despite our sin, God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked and longs that we should turn to him and live. These verses remind us that wickedness will not go unpunished. Ezekiel urges God's people to turn from evil and do what is right, so that they might live. As the book of Ezekiel unfolds, we learn that in God's great grace not only does God long for us to turn to him and live, but he also makes this transformation possible. Without God's intervention we have no hope of restoration. Ezekiel promises us that God will intervene to perform heart surgery, to turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, that our dry bones might live. It is easy for us to rail at God and accuse him of being unfair. Faced with this temptation, remember God's grace poured out to us in our Lord Jesus, who gives us new hearts to follow him.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Saturday 20 February 2016

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**Read: Deuteronomy 26.16-19**

This very day the Lord your God is commanding you to observe these statutes and ordinances; so observe them diligently with all your heart and with all your soul. Today you have obtained the Lord's agreement: to be your God; and for you to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, his commandments, and his ordinances, and to obey him. Today the Lord has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep his commandments; for him to set you high above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honour; and for you to be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised.

**Reflect**

These verses bring the legal section of the book of Deuteronomy to a close, with a restatement of the fundamental nature of the covenant. The Lord is to be Israel's God and Israel is to be the Lord's people. The great promise of Exodus 19 is repeated as the Lord reassures Israel that they are his treasured possession. The covenant relationship, freely and graciously given, is to be expressed in faithful obedience to God's commandments. God's people have been set apart as holy, belonging to God. They are now called to live as God as called them to live.

Israel's status as God's people is wholly a gift of grace. God did not choose them because of any merit they possessed. Indeed, Deuteronomy 7 makes it clear that Israel was nothing special. God chose them because he loved them. Israel's covenant relationship with God will now set them high above all the other nations of the world. But this is not for Israel's praise or fame or honour – rather it is for the praise and fame and honour of the Lord. The Bible tells us the story of God graciously choosing small groups of people, whether a family, a nation or a church, and reaching out to the wider world through them. In each case these small groups of people are reminded that they are nothing special and possess no merit of their own. However, as they bring praise and fame and honour to God, they become part of God's gracious plan to bring his blessing to the ends of the earth.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Monday 22 February 2016

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**Read: Daniel 9.4-10**

I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession, saying,  
'Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land.

'Righteousness is on your side, O Lord, but open shame, as at this day, falls on us, the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you. Open shame, O Lord, falls on us, our kings, our officials, and our ancestors, because we have sinned against you. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him, and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets.

**Reflect**

The narrative setting for the Book of Daniel is the sixth century BC, when the people of Judah were taken into exile, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. The book itself, however, was probably written about four centuries later, when the people of God were being persecuted by the Syrian King, Antiochus Epiphanes, who tried to enforce paganism on Israel and outlaw the Mosaic Law. Daniel's prayer in today's reading acknowledges the sinfulness of God's people, and the divine judgement on the nation as a whole. Yet the prayer concludes with the vibrant hope of God's mercy and forgiveness, despite rebellion. Lent is a time for us, like Daniel, to reflect on human sinfulness and its tragic consequences. But far more than that, it is a time to meditate on the nature of our God who is wondrously gracious and generous, loving and forgiving us far beyond our deserving.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Pray for a deeper sense of God's forgiving love in our lives, and in the lives of those around us. Think of those haunted by guilt and inadequacy, and pray that God's love may enfold them.

Tuesday 23 February 2016

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**Read: Isaiah 1.10, 16-18**

Hear the word of the Lord,  
you rulers of Sodom!  
Listen to the teaching of our God,  
you people of Gomorrah!  
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your doings  
from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil,  
learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow.  
Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord:  
though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be like snow;  
though they are red like crimson,  
they shall become like wool.

**Reflect**

The first part of Isaiah (chapters 1 to 39), generally called 'First Isaiah', is a book in itself and was written probably in the eighth century BC in a period of political upheaval. The prophet's message emphasizes the holiness of God and God's opposition to oppression of the weak and poor. In today's reading, Isaiah speaks out words both of challenge and reassurance, judgement and salvation. God utters a stern demand for purity and goodness in personal and national life. This goodness includes justice, and the care of the weak and needy. Alongside this blazing indictment against indifference to the poor, Isaiah assures us of God's cleansing grace that can renew and transform us, no matter what we have done. This is a Lenten call to ongoing conversion. The renewal of the heart towards God proves itself in our lives. What is at stake for Isaiah is the profound interconnection between worship and justice.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Pray for the renewal of the church and of our own hearts so that we may truly worship and truly serve God in righteousness, holiness and justice.

Wednesday 24 February 2016

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**Read: Jeremiah 18.18-20**

Then they said, 'Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah—for instruction shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us bring charges against him, and let us not heed any of his words.'

Give heed to me, O Lord,  
and listen to what my adversaries say!  
Is evil a recompense for good?  
Yet they have dug a pit for my life.  
Remember how I stood before you  
to speak good for them,  
to turn away your wrath from them.

### **Reflect**

The Book of Jeremiah was written during a time of crisis for the people of God in the seventh and sixth centuries BC, the period just before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. The prophet Jeremiah was a mournful figure, unloved, unappreciated, and misunderstood in his own context, hated for the way he named the truth and spoke the word of God directly and truthfully. In this passage, Jeremiah reveals himself as a sensitive person who feels keenly the rejection he suffers, and turns to God in bewilderment and pain. He brings his lament before God. In this sense, he is a type of Christ, who endured rejection, crucifixion and death. Perhaps we too have felt a sense of being disliked and misunderstood when we have stood up for what is right. Like Jeremiah, and like Jesus, our one refuge is in God who listens to our lamentation, and hears and vindicates us.

### **Respond, Remain, Return**

Consider those in today's world who are persecuted for their faith and ethical convictions. Pray for them that they may find true consolation in God alone. Pray also for their persecutors. Pray also for the strength to speak the truth in love.

Thursday 25 February 2016

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**Read: Jeremiah 17:5-8**

Thus says the Lord:  
Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals  
and make mere flesh their strength,  
whose hearts turn away from the Lord.  
They shall be like a shrub in the desert,  
and shall not see when relief comes.  
They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in an uninhabited salt land.  
Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,  
whose trust is the Lord.  
They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.  
It shall not fear when heat comes,  
and its leaves shall stay green;  
in the year of drought it is not anxious,  
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

### **Reflect**

The imagery in today's passage is vivid and powerful, and its message a simple one. Jeremiah offers us a choice of two ways for our lives. Either we place our trust—the meaning of our lives—in other people and other things (however good in themselves), or we set God at the centre of our lives. The first, says Jeremiah, is ultimately destructive, leading to drought and the shrinking of the soul; the second is life-giving, bringing growth and life. Here all things are set in proportion: love of God come first, and then love of neighbour (Mark 12:28-34). Jeremiah knew the truth of this and suffered for his passionate allegiance to God. To trust in God, to love God with our whole being, as Jesus did, is to be like a tree: fertile, leafy, healthy, and strong, able to withstand the cold and the heat, the drought and the flood.

### **Respond, Remain, Return**

Spend time in silence pondering the image of the strong, healthy tree (see Ps 1). Pray that we may be more deeply rooted and planted in Christ, so that we too can have flexibility and strength of heart, able to endure whatever is placed before us in faith and love.

Friday 26 February 2016

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**Read: Psalm 105:16-22**

When he summoned famine against the land,  
and broke every staff of bread,  
he had sent a man ahead of them,  
Joseph, who was sold as a slave.  
His feet were hurt with fetters,  
his neck was put in a collar of iron;  
until what he had said came to pass,  
the word of the Lord kept testing him.  
The king sent and released him;  
the ruler of the peoples set him free.  
He made him lord of his house,  
and ruler of all his possessions,  
to instruct his officials at his pleasure,  
and to teach his elders wisdom.

### **Reflect**

Psalm 105 is a hymn that recites the story of Israel from the ancestors to the exodus. Today's selection focuses on the figure of Joseph (Genesis 37-47), who was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and vindicated by Pharaoh who gave him great authority in Egypt. The point of the psalm is that, in all the strange turnings of history, in disaster and tragedy, in good times and bad, in all the decisions human beings make, God is mysteriously present; not manipulating people but working in and through their actions, even when they act wrongly and against God's decrees. God's sovereign will triumphs even in the midst of human folly and tragedy. Somehow, in some mysterious way, 'all things work together for good' (Rom 8:28). Even in our darkest moments, God is active and at work, drawing all things towards the promised goal—all things towards unity and bliss in Christ.

### **Respond, Remain, Return**

Pray for stronger faith and trust in the sovereign power and presence of God in all things, good and bad.

Saturday 27 February 2016

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**Read: Micah 7.14-15, 18-20**

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity  
and passing over the transgression  
of the remnant of your possession?  
He does not retain his anger for ever,  
because he delights in showing clemency.  
He will again have compassion upon us;  
he will tread our iniquities under foot.  
You will cast all our sins  
into the depths of the sea.  
You will show faithfulness to Jacob  
and unswerving loyalty to Abraham,  
as you have sworn to our ancestors  
from the days of old.

### **Reflect**

This beautiful passage, lyrical in its praise of God, comes from the prophet Micah, who lived in the eighth century BC in Judah. Micah's themes throughout the book focus on sin and judgement, doom and promise. Some consider today's passage a later addition to Micah, but it reflects his earlier conviction of the forgiving nature of God. God is angered at sin, but greater still is God's love of mercy, God's delight in forgiving. God is not resentful but freely abandons wrath at the first sign of repentance. This is the same God we find in Luke's Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32): the same delight in forgiveness, the same joy in welcoming home the sinner, the same determination to forget the past and open up a new and joyful future. Our God is indeed comparable. And we are expected to be like God in our readiness to forgive and welcome.

### **Respond, Remain, Return**

Reflect in silence on extraordinary nature of God in the light of today's passage. Consider memorising these verses to keep with you in times of need (for yourself or others). Give thanks for God's forgiveness and mercy, for God's compassion and faithfulness towards you and those whom you love.

Monday 29 February 2016

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**Read: Psalm 43**

Tuesday 1 March 2016

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Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause  
against an ungodly people;  
from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me!  
For you are the God in whom I take refuge;  
why have you cast me off?  
Why must I walk about mournfully  
because of the oppression of the enemy?  
O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me;  
let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.  
Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy;  
and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.  
Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.

### **Reflect**

In a situation of suffering, the Psalmist speaks frankly, even passionately, to God but also to his or her own self. Making this Psalm our own prayer means doing the same. God is the only source of hope, and we affirm this strongly at the same time as questioning, even rebuking God for silence or abandonment. God's help is seen as light and truth, not just the requested help or deliverance but the path that will lead to the Temple and to the praise that is the necessary and joyful response to the good thing hoped for from God. We may need to address ourselves, too. Having been reminded in this same song of praise that God is good and trustworthy, we also need to recall hope, and step from despair to trust. However difficult life is, what we have known once to be trustworthy and true is, and will be again.

### **Respond, Remain, Return**

Remember what God has done for us before, reflect honestly on what we need now, request frankly what we need, and hope.

### **Read: Psalm 25**

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.  
O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame;  
do not let my enemies exult over me.  
Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;  
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.  
Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.  
Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long.  
Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,  
for they have been from of old.  
Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;  
according to your steadfast love remember me,  
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!  
Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.  
He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

### **Reflect**

To seek a relationship with God – to “lift up one's soul” – is not merely a matter of “religious experience” in the usual sense. Here the Psalmist reflects on two (other) dimensions of faith: our dependence on God for the circumstances of our life, and our need for guidance. Life in the ancient world, as in many parts of today's world, was fragile and beset with danger. The Psalmist is clear that we are dependent on God in all things. Yet this is not presented simply as a hope or assumption for success or prosperity; instead, prayer for safety and well-being is interwoven with prayer for truth and instruction. It is meaningless to expect protection or success without opening ourselves to what God wants; and when we do that, might we not find that our understandings of what success is change entirely?

### **Respond, Remain, Return**

Pray for closeness to God—not merely in heart and mind, but in offering our lives for service.

Wednesday 2 March 2016

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**Read: Deuteronomy 4.1-2, 5-8**

So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you. See, just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!' For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

**Reflect**

Israel is given more than one reason to remember and observe the Law given through Moses. First, it is a condition for remaining in the land of promise to which God has led them through the wilderness after slavery in Egypt. Second, the observance of what is good and true will be a sign to others of Israel's wisdom and strength. Our own discipleship has a similar shape, personal and communal. Living the truth is what we ourselves need, for our integrity and wholeness. It is also a potential gift to others. Paradoxically our capacity to show this gift effectively may require us not to impose it, or confuse ourselves with the gift! Yet in the end we have not been brought here just for ourselves but for others; and to know this is to realize how near to us God is.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Ask for the capacity to obey, to assist, and to witness, in genuine humility. Remember that God's glory is our deepest purpose.

Thursday 3 March 2016

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**Read: Jeremiah 7.23-28**

But this command I gave them, 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you.' Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but, in the stubbornness of their evil will, they walked in their own counsels, and looked backwards rather than forwards. From the day that your ancestors came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day; yet they did not listen to me, or pay attention, but they stiffened their necks. They did worse than their ancestors did.

So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you. You shall say to them: This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the Lord their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.

**Reflect**

This reading is the shadow side of yesterday's; obedience gave way to something else, and disaster ensued. It is interesting, and sobering, that sin and injustice are here characterized primarily as stubbornness. We might be tempted to trivialize that as a trait or annoyance, but this passage suggests otherwise. Faithfulness is not (just) persistence in the truth, but willingness to change. Holding fast to whatever we always have, however sincerely, is not likely to mean the same thing as true obedience. Discerning the prophets of today who may be calling us back to God's love and truth is not easy, but is necessary. The alternative is that we become not God's people but our own gods instead.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

What do we need to change? What do we need to treasure and retain? Pray for discernment, and courage, to do both.

Friday 4 March 2016

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**Read: Hosea 14.2-7**

Take words with you and return to the Lord;  
say to him, 'Take away all guilt;  
accept that which is good,  
and we will offer the fruit of our lips.  
Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses;  
we will say no more, "Our God", to the work of our hands.  
In you the orphan finds mercy.'

I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely,  
for my anger has turned from them.  
I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily,  
he shall strike root like the forests of Lebanon.  
His shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive tree,  
and his fragrance like that of Lebanon.  
They shall again live beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden;  
they shall blossom like the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of  
Lebanon.

**Reflect**

Israel's history – like yours or mine – is not as straightforward as a simple success or failure. God creates, saves and recreates; we obey, we fail, we misunderstand, we mourn, we return, we are renewed. In this case Hosea has Israel returning from reliance on violence, power and idolatry in a failed alliance with Assyria. God's reception of them, by contrast, is healing, unconditional love and renewal. This is harder to accept than it might sound. We may not love ourselves or others enough to think that we can accept such love. We may not want to leave behind every shred of power over others or every other idol ('work of our hands') that we have created, yet find ourselves serving. The vision of wholeness that God offers is, however, persistent; again and again, we are welcomed and renewed.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Accept God's acceptance of you; be prepared to let go whatever stops you from doing so.

Saturday 5 March 2016

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**Read: Hosea 5.15-6.6**

I will return again to my place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face. In their distress they will beg my favour:  
'Come, let us return to the Lord;  
for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us;  
he has struck down, and he will bind us up.  
After two days he will revive us;  
on the third day he will raise us up,  
that we may live before him.  
Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his appearing is as sure as the dawn;  
he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth.'

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?  
Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early.  
Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets, I have killed them by the words of my mouth, and my judgement goes forth as the light. For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings.

**Reflect**

Although these words begin with a withdrawal, God anticipates Israel's return, confident that they will again come seeking healing. The reference to being raised up on the third day reminds Christians of the resurrection, and of Christ as our representative, sharing in our own need for healing and, risen, firstfruits of our own hope for redemption. Lamenting the people's inconstancy, their love like morning mist, God reveals that steadfast love (*hesed*)—the same covenant faithfulness God shows and they lack—is what is needed. This means not just religious persistence but social justice. The new world God promises in Hosea and Jesus leads us towards in the resurrection is renewal and restoration for all people.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Pray for healing and renewal for ourselves, our society, our earth.

Monday 7 March 2016

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**Read: Isaiah 65.17-19**

For I am about to create new heavens  
and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered  
or come to mind.  
But be glad and rejoice for ever  
in what I am creating;  
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,  
and its people as a delight.  
I will rejoice in Jerusalem,  
and delight in my people;  
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,  
or the cry of distress.

**Reflect**

This is near the end of Isaiah's vision of the final restoration of God people after their return from exile in Babylon. Isaiah's vision is a tale of two cities, Babylon and Jerusalem: Babylon represents Gods' judgement, scattering, exile, displacement, homelessness; Jerusalem represents God's grace, forgiveness, welcome, community and the homecoming of God's people. In Hebrews 11 the promised land points forward to a greater reality, 'a better country', 'a city that has foundations, whose builder and maker is God' [Hebrews 11:16,10].

So we have a vivid vision of a transformed world, which we know will include a renewed heaven and earth; the church, the bride of Christ; God living among his people; and the gathering of people from all nations around the throne of God and of the Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ [See Revelation 21,22].

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Fill your mind and imagination with this vision of God's wonderful future for the church of Jesus Christ, and for the world, the glory which Christ will bring.

Tuesday 8 March 2016

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**Read: Ezekiel 47.1-2, 9, 12**

Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple towards the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me round on the outside to the outer gate that faces towards the east; and the water was coming out on the south side. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.'

**Reflect**

This vision comes near the end of Ezekiel's prophecy. Jerusalem with its temple was to be destroyed because of the sin of God's people, and the people themselves sent to exile in Babylon. In this vision the people return to an idealised rebuilt Jerusalem and temple, where God will live among his people [48:35].

What should Christians make of this vision? The temple was 'the visible sign of the Christ to come' of God living among us: 'The word was made flesh and lived among us' [John 1:14]. The temple priests and sacrifices were shadows of Christ our great high priest, and his sacrifice made once for all for us on the cross [Hebrews 7-10]. The river is a powerful picture of Christ's gospel bringing healing to all the nations [Revelation 22:1-5].

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Thank God for Jesus Christ, the one in whom all God's fullness dwells, our great high priest and saving sacrifice; thank God for the life-giving power of the gospel; pray that the gospel may go to all nations.

Wednesday 9 March 2016

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**Read: Isaiah 49.8-9, 13-15**

Thus says the Lord:  
In a time of favour I have answered you,  
on a day of salvation I have helped you;  
I have kept you and given you  
as a covenant to the people,  
to establish the land,  
to apportion the desolate heritages;  
saying to the prisoners, 'Come out',  
to those who are in darkness, 'Show yourselves.'  
Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;  
break forth, O mountains, into singing!  
For the Lord has comforted his people,  
and will have compassion on his suffering ones.  
But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me,  
my Lord has forgotten me.'  
Can a woman forget her nursing-child,  
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?  
Even these may forget,  
yet I will not forget you.

#### **Reflect**

God promises to enable his Servant to rescue, to make a covenant to re-build God's people, and to bring them safely home. Then comes an outburst of praise for God's comfort and compassion. Then doubts surface: God's people fear that he has forsaken and forgotten them. No: eternal love triumphs even if maternal love fails. These words of gospel comfort, consolation and compassion point us to God's great mercy in Jesus Christ, for he comes to us 'clothed in the promises of God.' As surely as God delivered his people in the Old Testament from exile in Babylon, so surely he has rescued us in Christ: 'in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins' [Colossians 1:13,14].

#### **Respond, Remain, Return**

Follow the prophet's footsteps through hearing God's promise, praising God's mercy, and doubting God's patience: be reassured of God's compassion, promised and never forgotten by God, and never to be forgotten by us.

Thursday 10 March 2016

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**Read: Psalm 106.19-22, 24**

They made a calf at Horeb  
and worshipped a cast image.  
They exchanged the glory of God  
for the image of an ox that eats grass.  
They forgot God, their Saviour,  
who had done great things in Egypt,  
wondrous works in the land of Ham,  
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.  
Then they despised the pleasant land,  
having no faith in his promise.

#### **Reflect**

We might wonder that the people of God so quickly turn from God, make idols for themselves, forget God and his great works, and so despise his gifts, and lose faith in his promise. It is a frightening account of a corporate 'Rake's Progress.' Yet the long narrative of the Psalm shows God's constancy, forgiveness, faithfulness, gifts, and provision, all based on his covenant promise that they will be his people and he will be their God. Yet we so naturally love God's gifts in creation, but fail to love the heavenly giver of those gifts. And we also so naturally turn away from the wonder of the message of Jesus Christ, his incarnation, baptism, miracles, teaching, transfiguration, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension.

#### **Respond, Remain, Return**

Let us heed the warning, as well as receive the encouragements of these words: let us be wary of idolatry, especially greed [Ephesians 5:5]; wary of despising the natural and supernatural gifts of God; and wary of losing faith in his promise. 'For all the promises of God find their Yes in Christ' [2 Corinthians 1:20].

Friday 11 March 2016

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**Read: Psalm 34.15-19, 22**

The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,  
and his ears are open to their cry.  
The face of the Lord is against evildoers,  
to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.  
When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears,  
and rescues them from all their troubles.  
The Lord is near to the broken-hearted,  
and saves the crushed in spirit.  
Many are the afflictions of the righteous,  
but the Lord rescues them from them all.  
The Lord redeems the life of his servants;  
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

**Reflect**

As so often in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament [including Psalms and Proverbs], what look like absolute claims are in fact meant to be characteristic not universal. God often acts like this, but not in every situation. In Hebrews 11 many experienced the deliverance of God: but those in Hebrews 11:35-38 did not, and still lived 'by faith'.

Christian believers in former days distinguished between the 'covenanted mercies of God,' and the 'uncovenanted mercies of God.' 'Covenanted mercies' are those gifts promised by God, that he will always give us, like the forgiveness of our sins. 'Uncovenanted mercies' are those that God is not bound to give us, but which he often does. The noble army of martyrs knows that God does not always rescue us from pain, suffering and death. However even in the midst of great disaster, we can still find the gracious care and gifts of God: precious, even if they are 'small things.'

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Reflect on God's 'covenanted mercies' in our lives today. Reflect on some of God 'uncovenanted mercies' in our lives today. Praise God for all his mercies, and rest in our merciful God.

Saturday 12 March 2016

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**Read: Jeremiah 11.18-20**

It was the Lord who made it known to me, and I knew;  
then you showed me their evil deeds.  
But I was like a gentle lamb  
led to the slaughter.  
And I did not know it was against me  
that they devised schemes, saying,  
'Let us destroy the tree with its fruit,  
let us cut him off from the land of the living,  
so that his name will no longer be remembered!'  
But you, O Lord of hosts, who judge righteously,  
who try the heart and the mind,  
let me see your retribution upon them,  
for to you I have committed my cause.

**Reflect**

We see anticipations and signs of the coming Lord Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. The temple, God's earthly throne, anticipates that one day 'the Word will become flesh, and make his home among us.' The priests and sacrifices of the temple point forward to Christ our great high priest, and to his 'one sacrifice for sins, made once for all.' Jonah's suffering were an anticipation of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. And the sufferings of the people of God anticipated Christ's sufferings: we see this in our reading today on the sufferings of Jeremiah. Jeremiah sees the evil deeds of humanity, as the evil of humanity will take Christ to the cross. Jeremiah, like Christ, was led 'like a gently lamb to the slaughter.' And Jeremiah, like Christ, entrusted himself and his cause to God. [See also Isaiah 53:6-8, and Acts 8:26-40].

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Reflect on the sufferings of the saints in the Bible, and on the sufferings and martyrdom of Christians today. See their endurance as a sign of God's grace, and their sufferings as reflections of Christ's sufferings. See too that Christ suffers now in the suffering of his people. Wonder at the sufferings and glories of Christ, especially in his death and resurrection.

Monday 14 March 2016

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**Read: Psalm 23**

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
my whole life long.

**Reflect**

A psalm is a song or a chant which allows sounds, images and rhythms to create meaning. Two images are clear in Psalm 23: First, Jahweh is a shepherd. The shepherd is not quite the gentle, pastoral image that we think. It was a common image for a king and this psalm presents the king's role in keeping people safe (v4) and in providing sustenance (v2&3).

The second image is of God as the host at a sacred meal (v5&6), probably in the Jerusalem Temple at a sacrifice of thanksgiving where the psalmist's enemies may well have been present. God draws the psalmist into the host's protection and blesses the guest (v5b).

Putting these two images together creates a wonderful picture not of meekness but of strength and efficacy. The psalm points forward to Jesus, shepherd, king and host, whose death and resurrection guarantees that "goodness and mercy" follow us all the days of our lives.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Tuesday 15 March 2016

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**Read: Numbers 21.4-9**

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.' Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

**Reflect**

The wilderness generation moved between death and life. Rescued, yet not quite safe, they resemble the nineteen million displaced people in our world. Yet this was Israel, meant to model life under Jahweh, the Lord, as they worked with the marginal circumstances they encountered on their way to safety in their promised land. Forced to take a southern route to skirt uncooperative Edom ((24:18-21) when their destination lay to the north, they grew restive and found another chance to speak "against God and against Moses". They did not hold back (v5).

Consider the Lord's role in sending poisonous snakes to elicit repentance, then in providing a visual image of the same thing to nullify their poisonous affects. In sending snakes and then in providing an opportunity for healing, the Lord causes them to ponder the connection between death and redemption that we see best in the cross of Christ.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Wednesday 16 March 2016

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**Read: Psalm 102.18-22**

Let this be recorded for a generation to come,  
so that a people yet unborn may praise the Lord:  
that he looked down from his holy height,  
from heaven the Lord looked at the earth,  
to hear the groans of the prisoners,  
to set free those who were doomed to die;  
so that the name of the Lord may be declared in Zion,  
and his praise in Jerusalem,  
when peoples gather together,  
and kingdoms, to worship the Lord.

**Reflect**

Sometimes psalmists plait ideas to make interesting patterns. In this psalm, the writer weaves an individual lament (vv1-11; 23-24) into a song about God's enduring reign (vv12-17; 25-28). A frail suppliant cries out to an eternal God.

Our verses (vv18-22) focus on the one defining event which was recorded, then rehearsed annually and still is being told in 2010: that the Lord saw and rescued his people when trapped in Egypt. Recalled every time his people gathered, the Exodus was one event by which Yahweh would be eternally remembered in Zion.

We read this as a generation who knows a different rescue, that of Jesus' work. Like Israel we hold the story and live it out in worship (v22). Consider what difference it makes, that our vulnerable lives are plaited into a bigger plan. Reflect on the fact that the Lord did not just "look down" (v19) but came down and became both the suffering individual and the one who accomplished a great rescue.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Thursday 17 March 2016

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**Read: Genesis 17.3-9**

Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.'

God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.'

**Reflect**

It was Israel's conviction that she belonged to God in a special way, best called by the word "covenant". In our passage we see its shape and meaning. "Covenant" was their special word for understanding their life under Yahweh. It was both their identity and their calling.

Covenant was different to "promise". Ishmael, Abram's son by Hagar, had a promise from God (17:20) but only the offspring of Abram and Sarai would carry the covenant.

The covenant was God's binding of himself to Abraham and Sarah's line. He bound himself to make them fruitful (v6), to produce lines of nations and kings (v6) and to give them a land (v8). He committed himself to be their God forever (v8).

Christians are the beneficiaries of a new covenant sealed in the death of Jesus. Reflect on this new binding of God to us, his people. As for Abraham, it takes radical faith to believe that God does what he says.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Friday 18 March 2016

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**Read: Psalm 18.1-7**

I love you, O Lord, my strength.  
The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,  
my God, my rock in whom I take refuge,  
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.  
I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised;  
so I shall be saved from my enemies.  
The cords of death encompassed me;  
the torrents of perdition assailed me;  
the cords of Sheol entangled me;  
the snares of death confronted me.  
In my distress I called upon the Lord;  
to my God I cried for help.  
From his temple he heard my voice,  
and my cry to him reached his ears.  
Then the earth reeled and rocked;  
the foundations also of the mountains trembled  
and quaked, because he was angry.

**Reflect**

We can identify three speakers of this psalm. The first is the individual who found in Yahweh a God of strength and safety for the oppressed (vv1-2) and brought his song into worship in the Temple. We find similar thoughts in the Songs of Hannah (1 Sam 2:10) and Zechariah (Luke 1:69).

The second is a king who has found victory in battle. Israel, at the crossroads of history, felt the trampling boots of many invaders. It took many battles before David rested from war. This psalm is especially attributed to him in 2 Samuel 22.

The third is Jesus, who clearly experienced this psalm in his dying and resurrection when he encountered enemies and an evil that we can barely fathom.

Although we often prefer to think of a kindly, gentle God, we need to consider the powerful work of fighting evil best described, as in this psalm, as the work of a warrior.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

Saturday 19 March 2016

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**Read: Ezekiel 37.24-28**

My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they and their children and their children's children shall live there for ever; and my servant David shall be their prince for ever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them for evermore. My dwelling-place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations shall know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them for evermore.

**Reflect**

Much had happened between Israel and God by the time Ezekiel heard words from God. Land, covenant, kingship and nationhood had all been lost. Israel had been deported to Babylon in two stages (597 and 587 BCE) and so moribund it was like a cemetery of dry bones (37:11-12). Ezekiel himself was among them in Babylon with the deathly task of speaking God's words to a shell-shocked generation.

Our passage picks up a second strand of Ezekiel's work when he prophesied renewal for Israel. United under one shepherd, in their promised land, they would have security (v25), peace (v26) and growth (v26). A cleansed and restored people would enable a holy God to dwell amongst them once more.

Consider how God dwells amongst us these days through Jesus' work. Ezekiel says that this draws outsiders into knowledge of Him (v28). Of all forms of mission, this is the most eloquent.

**Respond, Remain, Return**

## Contributors

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### 10-13 February Andreas Loewe

Andreas Loewe is Dean of Melbourne. He has been College Chaplain of Trinity College, Associate Vicar of Cambridge's University Church Great St Mary's, and Chaplain of Michaelhouse, a 'fresh connections' ministry with an award-winning café and gallery.

### 15-20 February David Williams

David Williams worked in Nairobi, Kenya for nine years, where he and his wife Rachel were involved in ministry in Kibera, one of the largest slums in sub-Saharan Africa. David now heads up training for CMS-Australia, based at St Andrew's Hall in Parkville.

### 22-27 February Dorothy Lee

Dorothy Lee is Theology Dean and Frank Woods Professor of New Testament at University of Divinity and a Canon of St Paul's Cathedral. She has lectured, taught and published in New Testament theology, particularly the Gospel of John.

### 29 Feb-5 March Andrew McGowan

Andrew McGowan is Dean and President at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. He has been Warden of Trinity College, and a Canon of St Paul's Cathedral. He is interested in food, music, and thinking about history, theology and the Bible.

### 7-12 March Peter Adam

Peter Adam is Vicar Emeritus at St Jude's Carlton and Senior Canon of St Paul's Cathedral. He has been the Principal of Ridley Melbourne. His ministry includes teaching, preaching, leading, counseling, mentoring, encouraging, loving, and praying.

### 14-19 March Barbara Deutschmann

Barbara Deutschmann coordinates the Indigenous Support Program Dhumba for TEAR Australia and reads, thinks and writes about the Bible and our world. She likes being with her family, knitting, football and riding her bike.

## Ongoing Resources

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You might like to try some of the following resources:

### Daily Online Resources

[www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com) Bible readings for each day

[www.sacredspace.ie](http://www.sacredspace.ie) An online daily prayer resource from the Irish Jesuits, in the Ignatian style.

[www.pray-as-you-go.org](http://www.pray-as-you-go.org) An online daily prayer resource from the Jesuits in Britain

### Daily Booklets

**Closer to God** Booklets of daily notes with an emphasis on renewal.

Order from [www.scriptureunion.org.au](http://www.scriptureunion.org.au).

**Encounter with God** A thoughtful, in depth approach to Bible study.

Order from [www.scriptureunion.org.au](http://www.scriptureunion.org.au).

**Every Day with Jesus** A reflective and meditative series of bible notes.

Order from [www.cwrstore.org.uk](http://www.cwrstore.org.uk)

**Bible Reading Fellowship** Booklet includes printed Bible text.

Order from [www.biblereadingnotes.org.uk](http://www.biblereadingnotes.org.uk)