

Lent

Learning to love like Jesus

by
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— ❧ ALL ABOUT LENT ❧ —

There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that a good Lent makes a wonderful Easter. I don't mean that to be like the man who, when asked why he was beating his head against a brick wall, said 'it's just so nice when I stop!' There is more to Easter than the first bite of chocolate, sip of wine or gasp of cigarette. I mean that, really, Lent is not all about making life ghastly for ourselves for a few weeks, just to show we can, but it is actually about Easter, and our focus has to be on those distant hills right from the very beginning. Our penances and prayers are all about the resurrection; not just our Lord's, but our own. They are all about allowing his grace to do its work in us, making us more like him, becoming less self-centred and more other-centred and God-centred, and putting us back in charge of ourselves; working out our salvation in fear and trembling, as St Paul puts it (*Philippians 2:12*).

The Greek philosophers likened the human person to a chariot, with two horses and a charioteer. The charioteer corresponds to our reason, while the two horses are our will and our appetites. If the charioteer is really to be in charge of the vehicle, it is vital that both horses, which provide all the necessary power are both of equal strength. However, our experience is that our appetites are much stronger than our wills, and so we can be said to

be in a real state of slavery; we are simply unable to choose whether or not to have that cigarette or chocolate, or at least our freedom is heavily restricted by our weakness of will or our addiction. The reason cannot be in charge of the chariot because one of the horses is simply out of control. This has to be remedied.

Lent is a time of special graced effort to put things back in order. I'm told that it takes about six weeks to acquire a new habit or lose one, and, providentially, Lent is six weeks. So if you have not already done so, may I suggest you think of addressing four areas during Lent; to do some additional prayer, to regularly give 'Lenten alms' to some charity, to try and actually acquire some virtue or other, and to undertake some discipline or penance. May I suggest that each evening you prayerfully consider how well (or otherwise) you have put this into practice? And on the next page you will find somewhere to actually write down your resolutions; do take advantage of it, it really helps.

When tackling some fault, it's usually much better to use an indirect approach. Try to acquire the opposite virtue instead; if meanness is the problem, try being positively generous to people. If one is irritable and picky, try the old boy scout trick of doing 'a good deed every day'. Much more progress is made this way, and it's far less frustrating.

Finally, don't aim too high! Much better to make a resolution to do something small and actually succeed than set oneself up for failure.

You might want to consider completing something like this to keep with you over the weeks ahead

My Resolutions for Lent:

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The Virtue I will acquire is:

.

The extra Prayer I will undertake is:

.

The Penance I will undertake is:

.

I will give Alms to:

.

Signed:

Date:

————— ❧ ASH WEDNESDAY ❧ —————
AND THE DAYS AFTER

The lead-in to Lent can seem a little strange, like that tail of the rosary that most of us ignore. In fact, it's a relative newcomer to the liturgy; until the 1970 reforms of the rites, the actual Lenten cycle of readings and prayers did not start until the Sunday. Some have suggested that this is because Lent should be forty days (in imitation of those forty days when the Lord fasted and was tempted), and if one removes the Sundays from our forty days of Lent, (because Sunday is always the day of the Resurrection), then one needs these extra days to make up.

Well, be that as it may, a run up is often a good idea, simply to get up to speed. We should use these days to establish us in the good habits that we have already resolved on, remembering the words of St Philip Neri, echoing the words of our Lord; "it is not he who begins, but who perseveres to the end who will be saved". Jesus also says:

'Which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build, and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going to encounter another king in

war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an embassy and asks terms of peace'. (*Luke 14:28-32 (RSV)*)

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father; since sackcloth and ashes are a little old-fashioned these days, help me instead to tear my sins rather than my clothes. From this moment I intend to be all yours, living like Jesus and never sinning again.

'Give me thy grace, good Lord, to set the world at naught, to set my mind fast upon thee, and not to hang upon the blast of men's mouths. To be content to be solitary. Not to long for worldly company. Little and little utterly to cast off the world, and rid my mind of all the business thereof. Not to long to hear of any worldly things, but that the hearing of worldly fantasies may be to me displeasing. Gladly to be thinking of God. Piteously to call for his help. To lean unto the comfort of God. Busily to labour to love him. To know my own vileness and wretchedness. To humble and meeken myself under the mighty hand of God. To bewail my sins passed. For the purging of them, patiently to suffer adversity. Gladly to bear my purgatory here. To be joyful of tribulations. To walk the narrow way that leadeth to life. To bear the cross with Christ.

'To have the last things in remembrance. To have ever afore mine eye my death that is ever at hand. To make death no stranger to me. To foresee and consider the everlasting fire of hell. To pray for pardon before the judge to come. To have continually in mind the passion that Christ suffered for me. For his benefits incessantly to give him thanks. To buy the time again that I before have lost. To abstain from the vain confabulations. To eschew light, foolish mirth and gladness. Recreations not necessary to cut off. Of worldly substance, friends, liberty, life, and all, to set the loss at right naught for the winning of Christ. To think my worst enemies my best friends. For the brethren of Joseph could never have done him so much good with their love and favour as they did him with their malice and hatred. These minds are more to be desired of every man, than all the treasures of all the princes and kings, Christian and heathen, were it gathered and laid together all upon one heap.'

(St Thomas More)

Words to reflect on

Forty days and forty nights
 Thou wast fasting in the wild
 Forty days and forty nights
 Tempted and yet undefiled.

Let us thine endurance share,
 And awhile from joys abstain,
 With thee watching unto prayer,
 Strong with thee to suffer pain.

And if Satan, vexing sore,
 Flesh or spirit should assail,
 Thou, his vanquisher before,
 Grant we may not faint nor fail.

So shall we have peace divine,
 Holier gladness ours shall be,
 Round us too shall angels shine,
 Such as ministered to thee.

Keep, O keep us, Saviour dear,
 Ever constant by thy side,
 That with thee we may appear
 At the eternal Eastertide.

(Words G. H. Smyttan and Francis Pott)

For meditation this week*2 Corinthians 5:16-6:10**Matthew 6:1-18*

Next Sunday's Gospel

Year A: *Matthew 4:1-11*Year B: *Mark 1:12-15*Year C: *Luke 4:1-13***To do this week**

1. Begin Lent by celebrating the Sacrament of Penance with a really good confession.
2. Ask for God's grace to make a good Lent.
3. Fill in the form in the introduction to this booklet.

Seven times he spoke, seven words of love,
 And all three hours his silence cried
 For mercy on the sons of men;
 Jesus our love is crucified!
 (Fr Faber from
 'O come and mourn with me awhile')

————— ✠ THE FIRST WORD ✠ —————
 FROM THE CROSS

“Father, forgive them,
 for they know not what they do.”

St Luke tells us that our Lord spoke these words as they crucified him (*Luke 23:34*), and customarily we picture them being spoken as the soldiers drive the nails into his hands, sometimes identifying our sins as being blows of the hammer.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is one of the key elements in the Christian religion. We pray in the Our Father: *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*; our Lord reminds us that if we expect to be forgiven our sins, we must, must, forgive our neighbours from our hearts (*Matthew 6:14-5, Mark 11:25*).

Frankly, this isn't always easy. In fact sometimes it can be so difficult as to seem impossible, because, on occasions, people really can do things that seem unforgivable, and often those who do it are those whom we have really loved.

'It is not an enemy who taunts me then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me then I

could hide from him. But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to hold sweet converse together; within God's house we walked in fellowship. (*Psalms* 54 (55):12-14).

When we have been hurt very badly, we cannot help feeling the pain of what has been done, and this constant internal nagging, which sometimes keeps us lying awake worrying about it, and the accompanying frustration and bitterness can often be mistaken, even by ourselves, for a lack of forgiveness.

But it isn't necessarily so. Allow me to take a simple example; if I step on your toe, and ask you to forgive me, I hope that you would. But the act of forgiveness will in itself not stop your toe hurting; it just makes your forgiveness all the more generous. When the hurt done has been much greater than this-and many of those reading this will know just what this means in their own lives-the damage done sometimes can be so severe as to make it practically impossible to restore the one who has done the damage to intimacy again. But this is not necessarily lack of forgiveness talking, it may be simply be the result of our hurt, and of necessary self-preservation. So not being able to bear the presence of one who has hurt us badly is not necessarily an indication that we have not forgiven them.

Which begs the question; what is lack of forgiveness, then?

Two wrongs don't make a right

It seems to me that what a failure to forgive consists in is in a desire to return evil for evil; the desire to multiply evil by taking revenge on the one who has hurt us. This is to undo the work that our Lord came to do in the establishment of his Kingdom. We have to live in the kingdom of this world, this vale of tears, because we are human beings, but the Kingdom of God exists where the rule of God is honoured. This is the dignity of a Christian, precisely not to live by *this* world's rule, but by God's. In this way, the Kingdom of God which will exist fully in the world to come, exists also already among us. (*Luke* 17:21)

When hearing confessions, and trying to determine whether somebody who confesses an unforgiving spirit really means what he or she says, I often ask whether, were that person to encounter their enemy in serious trouble, injured perhaps, they would help their enemy, or pass by on the other side. It's not a bad rule of thumb if we ever wonder whether we have forgiven, and the realization that we would indeed help those who have hurt us can reassure us that we may indeed have done so, and are simply still feeling hurt.

There is also the fact, which we must never forget, that we need God's forgiveness, too. I do not think that any of us has the right to be smug before God; we all need his pardon. So, especially if it has been some time since you have celebrated the Sacrament of Penance (or been to

confession, as most of us say), how about starting Lent well, and asking God for his forgiving grace in the very way that he gave us for this purpose? And perhaps even think of doing so weekly during Lent.

Let us pray:

Almighty and merciful God, whose overflowing love caused your only Son to take flesh and die for the sake of those who had offended you, grant to us that same spirit of warm and generous forgiveness towards our neighbour, especially towards those who have brought us harm. As his arms, extended to receive the nails, opened also to embrace the world; may we, too, see the afflictions we receive in this world as our opportunity to participate in his saving passion and win forgiveness both for our own sins and also those of our neighbours.

Lord God, help us to understand that forgiveness is one of the greatest gifts we can receive from you, and that we can give to others. So may we love others as you love them, forgive others as you forgive them, and so come with our brothers and sisters in one bond of love to that kingdom where you live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

Take away, Lord God, this bitterness from my heart. Take my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh that I may put this sorrow behind me and burn with the same charitable love that you have for N. who has hurt me.

If it be your will, Lord, turn back the heart of N. towards me, that he/she may put right what is wrong (where that is possible) and unite us once more in friendship.

Lord Jesus Christ, whose arms were extended on the cross out of love for me, here I am acknowledging that it was I who drove those nails into your hands and feet by my sins. Help me to truly cleanse my soul and seek forgiveness in the Sacrament of Penance, hiding nothing from you who were hung naked on the cross for me.

For meditation this week

Psalm 50 (51)

Mark 11:25-6

Luke 15:11-32

1 John 1:5-2:11

Next Sunday's Gospel

Year A: *Matthew 17:1-9*

Year B: *Mark 9: 2-10*

Year C: *Luke 9: 28-36*

To do this week

1. Consider whether there is anyone with whom I feel at enmity. Pray for that person, and consider whether there is anything I can do to heal the breach.
2. Review my Lenten resolutions. Have I made a good beginning?

— ❖ THE SECOND WORD ❖ —
FROM THE CROSS

“Truly I say to you;
today you will be with me in paradise.”

‘One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”’ (*Luke 23:39-43 (RSV)*)

Taking the long view

A young student of law called Francesco Zazzara came to see St Philip Neri, and spoke enthusiastically about his future career. St Philip listened gravely, and encouraged Francesco to tell him more, asking him repeatedly; ‘and what happens next?’ When the young man had finally (and perhaps with a hint of exasperation) said ‘well, after that there’s only death’, St Philip’s eyes twinkled as he said ‘and what happens next?’

It was a turning point in Francesco’s life; for the first time he saw his life in context. To fritter away this life, as if there was never going to be an afterlife, is like a child who fritters away his or her schooldays, as if there were never going to be exams or the necessity of getting a job one day. In this particular case, Francesco Zazzara abandoned the law, and became a priest.

Which, of course, is not the only response to give when we are confronted with eternity; fortunately, not everyone has a vocation to priesthood, or the human race would not last long. But the remembrance of eternity, of heaven (and not to exclude the possibility of the alternative, either) has to play an important part in the making of our decisions while we live here on earth.

The good thief, sometimes called St Dismas, teaches us a useful lesson. Let’s be quite clear; he had not lived a good life. We can’t escape the fact that he was a thief, and was, in the harsh terms of those days, being justly, if brutally, executed. But he demonstrated two vital things; repentance and faith. And, one might add, charitable pity for a man suffering innocently.

His first virtue was to ‘get real’ about his own need for forgiveness. There is nothing so spiritually destructive as arrogance about our own virtue, particularly when coupled with despite for another’s weakness. As we saw last week, we all need forgiveness, and we all need to ask for it. And the good thief’s second virtue was to ask for

salvation from the very one who could grant it. And so it was granted. As simple as that. Even though he came for forgiveness in the very last hours of his life,

‘Between the stirrup and the ground,
He mercy sought, and mercy found.’

And as for heaven, the goal of all our striving; what are we to make of it? When I was a child, I used to think of heaven as being eternally in church. Not an image to titillate the excitement much. Perhaps we don’t think enough of the new heaven and the new earth that we are promised. Yes, we will, please God, have the ‘beatific vision’; always being in, and revelling in, God’s presence. But in his own life on earth, our Lord never lost that beatific vision, and somehow I suspect that neither will we in our new life on earth; some mystics suggest that we can have it partially here and now, even in this life. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body suggests very strongly that there lies in store for us a full and real life; we won’t just get our bottoms back to sit on pews for all eternity, if I can put it like that; it will be a life lived to the full in an unspoilt world. Creation, this world, is already good, and it’s going to get a lot better. At the moment, it’s like the duvet cover, inside-out, somehow not quite right. Imagine all that is good, all you love (and not necessarily all that you are addicted or

enslaved to) being given to you to enjoy in perfect freedom, knowing its true value and the one from whom all good things come...well, perhaps you might just begin to get a little hint of what the new heaven and the new earth might be like.

Count your blessings, one by one; then seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.

Let us pray:

Lord God, teach me to desire heaven above all earthly things; to see the good things of this life as promises of the life to come, and the evils we must suffer as a way of getting us to heaven more quickly and surely. Lead me around and through this life in the most direct way that will lead to heaven. If it must hurt, hold my hand, I pray; I trust you, my Redeemer, my Rock.

O Lord, who led the children of Israel through the desert to the promised land, lead me to the promised land of heaven: the crossing of the red sea, my baptism; the pillar of fire, the light of your holy word; the manna, holy Communion; the river Jordan, my death. In your kindness, forgive my infidelities: when I have worshipped one molten calf or another; when I have doubted your promises or ignored your voice in Moses, the Church. I love you above all, and even here in the desert, I will trust you, my Redeemer, my Rock.

Words to reflect on

Guide me, O thou great Redeemer,
 Pilgrim through this barren land.
 I am weak, but thou art mighty,
 Hold me with thy powerful hand
 Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more.

Open now the crystal fountain,
 Whence the healing stream doth flow.
 Let the fire and cloudy pillar
 Lead me all my journey through.
 Strong deliverer, be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
 Bid my anxious fears subside.
 Death of death, and hell's destruction,
 Land me safe on Canaan's side.
 Songs of praises I will ever give to thee.
 (*W. Williams (1717-91), tr. P. & W. Williams*)

For prayer

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.
 (*This prayer could be said with a rosary, repeating the same phrase on every bead.*)

For meditation this week

Psalm 135 (134)
Apocalypse (Revelation) 21:1-7
Colossians 1:12-23
Matthew 20:1-16

Next Sunday's Gospel
 Year A: *John 4:5-42*
 Year B: *John 2:13-25*
 Year C: *Luke 13:1-9*

To do this week

1. Make a list of blessings; either write it down, or else simply think from time to time of all the good things that God has given you; this can be a good way to lift your spirits. Thank God for everything on the list.
2. Think of the things that you find difficult. Ask God to teach you to bear these things in the spirit of the good thief, that your faith and acceptance may win you salvation.
3. Review Lenten resolutions. Have I kept them honestly? If I made a long list of things to do and have succeeded in practically nothing, perhaps I need to make a new, more realistic list. If I have weakened, well, no harm done. I can always start again tomorrow.

— ❖ THE THIRD WORD ❖ —
FROM THE CROSS

“Woman, behold, your son
...behold your mother.”

‘Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home’. (*John 19:25-27 (RSV)*)

Mother of the Church

It was only in very recent times that the invocation *Mater Ecclesiae*, Mother of the Church, was officially added to the Litany of Loreto, and indeed the title itself is not an ancient one. The Second Vatican Council included in its document *Lumen Gentium*, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, a chapter exclusively devoted to the Blessed Virgin and her relationship to the Church; it is said that Pope Paul VI desired to have the Council proclaim this title, and when it did not do so, on the very same day as *Lumen Gentium* was promulgated, 21st November 1964, he did the job himself, asking that “henceforth the

Blessed Virgin be honoured and invoked with this title by all Christian people”.

The idea, though, *is* an old one. Perhaps you have seen those icons or other pictures that show our Lady with her cloak sheltering a number of people who cling close to her. Sometimes the figure is identified as the Church herself, at other times it is clearly our Lady; but often there is a creative ambiguity.

It is common to use these words from the Cross addressed to our Lady and St John - “Woman, behold your son...behold your mother”- to argue for our Lady’s ecclesiastical motherhood. I have to confess that personally (despite the fact that some of the Church Fathers assert it) I have never really found this very convincing; why does St John all of a sudden stand for the whole Church? It isn’t because he was the only member of the Church still there, the others having fled; St Mary Magdalene and the other women were there too. But wiser heads than mine see the connection that I am missing, (perhaps it is simply that St John is an Apostle) so you must take their word for it and not rely on me to explain it to you. However, the Church is, we know, the body of Christ, as St Paul tells us, and Mary is the Mother of him whose body we are, and so of course she is our mother precisely because we are members of the Church, the body of her Son. The title *Mater Ecclesiae*, therefore, is deeply appropriate and we would, as Pope Paul VI urged, do well to honour her with that name.

So, as her children, to cultivate then a love for our Lady as our own personal spiritual mother should be an important element in our faith. Do we not want to love everything that Jesus loves?

Who can fail to be moved by that scene on Calvary? Here we have the two people whom our Lord loved above all other mortals anguished as they saw him hang in agony on the cross. Can we doubt that he felt their anguish even through his pain, and that, too, increased what he suffered? And so, with what little strength he had left, he asked each to take care of the other, to fill something of the space that his death would cause. Salvation is not only about great dramatic acts of crucifixion and resurrection; it is about the little things, too, and this ought, especially in Lent, to make us look more closely at those around us whom we love, to make sure that in our efforts to do good we are not missing the little things that lie under our noses.

What I mean is that while we may be spending every free moment in Church or doing the Lord's work, or penancing ourselves to a pulp, do we take the time to show simple affection to our husbands or wives? Some people call it spending 'quality time' together, and even if the phrase makes you cringe, the concept is a good one. And there are our children, of course, and even our pets- almost any generous outgoing to others will make us better people. Actually, it is precisely with those whom

we love that we can be most difficult, perhaps because we know that we can rely on them to not stop loving us back however grumpy we are in the morning.

So, as a Lenten exercise, try sometimes not being difficult with those we love. If you think that that is scarcely Lenten; just try it for yourself. For one day, even one afternoon, try doing everything your spouse (or somebody else) would like you to do, but without arguing, inwardly rebelling or sulking; do it joyfully, for the sake of the Lord. You may surprise yourself with how good you feel about it, and you will certainly surprise your husband or wife and increase domestic harmony.

Let us pray:

Remember, O most loving Virgin Mary, that it is a thing unheard of that any one ever had recourse to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thy intercession, and was left forsaken. Filled, therefore, with confidence in thy goodness, I fly to thee, O Mother, Virgin of Virgins; to thee I come, before thee I stand, a sorrowful sinner. Despise not my words, O Mother of the Word incarnate, but graciously hear and grant my prayer. Amen.

Words to reflect on

At the cross, her station keeping,
 Stood the mournful mother weeping,
 Close to Jesus to the last.

Oh, how sad and sore-distressed
 Was that mother highly blessed
 Of the sole-begotten one.

Is there one who would not weep,
 Whelmed in miseries so deep,
 Christ's dear mother to behold?

O thou mother! Fount of love!
 Touch my spirit from above,
 Make my heart with thine accord.

Make me feel as thou has felt;
 Make my soul to glow and melt
 With the love of Christ my Lord.

Christ, when thou shalt call me hence,
 Be thy mother my defence,
 Be thy cross my victory.

While my body here decays,
 May my soul thy goodness praise,
 Safe in paradise with thee.
 (*Jacopone da Todi/Edward Caswall*)

Lord Jesus Christ, who gave us Mary to be our mother, increase our devotion to this most glorious Virgin. Aided by her prayers, and your glorious grace, may we learn to love you as she loves you and so come one day to heaven where you live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

Lord God, implant your love deep in the winter of our hearts that it may grow and flourish like the coming spring, lifting the hearts of those around us and making the world a more beautiful place. May those we live with, and those we love be filled with this same warmth so that this cold world may come one day to the eternal summer of the Kingdom where you live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

For meditation this week

Psalm 130 (131) - O Lord, my heart is not proud.

Romans 12:10-21 - A recipe for tranquil living with others.

Luke 1:46-56 - The Magnificat.

John 2:1-12 - The wedding at Cana; note our Lady's persuasive influence with our Lord, but we, too, must be prepared to 'do as he tells us'.

Next Sunday's Gospel

Year A: *John* 9:1-41

Year B: *John* 3:14-21

Year C: *Luke* 15:1-3, 11-32

To do this week

1. Prepare for Mothers' day. It's still a week away, but it bears thinking about now. If your mother has died, remember that you can pray for her. And we can honour our Lady, our heavenly mother, too.
2. Take some time consciously and selflessly to do somebody else's will for a time, without complaining, even to ourselves.
3. Our Lenten resolutions? 'The one who endures to the end will be saved' (*Matthew 24:13*). Prayer, fasting, almsgiving; there should be some of each.

— ❧ THE FOURTH WORD ❧ —
 FROM THE CROSS

“My God, my God;
 why have you forsaken me?”

‘Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” And some of the bystanders hearing it said, “This man is calling Elijah.” And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.”’ (*Matthew 27:45-49* (RSV))

Alone

Man is a social animal, said Aristotle, and the seventeenth century philosopher Spinoza agreed. And, broadly speaking, almost everyone thinks the same; even Margaret Thatcher, that lady famously not known for turning, had to qualify what she meant when in 1987 she told the readers of *Womans Own* that ‘There is no such thing as society’. Human beings are meant to be with other human beings. In recent years, the Church has

stressed with insistence the importance of the family; in 1997 Pope John Paul said that the family was ‘the family, the little domestic church, the sanctuary of life and the cradle of the civilization of love’.

Which can make somebody on his or her own feel pretty inadequate.

There can be all sorts of reasons for being on one’s own, and most of us are not alone through choice. Even if living alone is what we like best, it is rare to find somebody who genuinely prefers his or her own company all the time. If you have seen that very good film *Aviator*, you will have seen a man, the multi-millionaire Howard Hughes, driven to be alone by his inner demons. He hates to be alone, but somehow facing others is even worse.

Bereavement and desertion can be pretty terrible things to endure; one has had the love of another and suddenly it has all been taken away. But still worse, because sympathy is hard to find, is the loneliness of a person who is simply difficult to like for one reason or another, an awkward personality perhaps, or suffering a mental illness. Those who have to cope with the aching inner feeling of worthlessness as they see the eyes of others inevitably glaze over as they approach, those who daily live with the hopeless knowledge that it has been always thus, even at school, and probably will always be thus until they die.

I am touched and pleased that lonely people often find solace in a church community. There are many reasons for this, of course; for one, there tend to be a lot of kind people around a church, but I think that the innermost reason is quite simply God. God is the one whose eyes never glaze over, but whose eyes light up with welcome when we come into church to see him; God is the one who is not particularly interested in the rich, the beautiful, the well-connected, the clever simply because they are those things. God is the one who is never bored with our chatter, with our gauche ineptness. God is the one who really *understands* what it is like to be *me*.

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces. (*Isaiah 53:3*)

And of course there is good aloneness. God is far more likely to be heard in the still small voice of calm than in tumult and hurly-burly, though of course he is there, too, if one looks. Down through the ages, men and women have ‘left the world’ to seek God in stillness and solitude: from the early desert fathers, through the hermits of the middle ages to the many people these days who seek to ‘get away from it all’. It is a useful exercise from time to time (for those of us whose lives permit it) consciously to abstract ourselves from our usual lives and our usual companions, simply to be alone with God even if only for as little as half a day. It can be done in a monastery, or in

the countryside, or even in a park or garden. Solitude can refresh the spirit and give new impetus to our prayer. I counsel it even for those who are already lonely; it is a different thing one does; in a real sense one is keeping the very best company, with the One who loves us more than we can know.

Finally, in those tormented words from the cross, *My God, why have you abandoned me?* we should derive another comfort. When distress really does seem beyond our ability to endure, and we are tempted to lose faith in the goodness of God, or even faith that he exists, we too can say those words and mean them. If our Lord was allowed to, then so are we; it is no blasphemy, but the cry of the human spirit in the face of evil, facing the terrible consequences of a world lost in sin. But having cried that, then we must remember what came after: the resurrection.

God did not come into this world to save us from pain, or loss, or loneliness in the here and now, though sometimes it does work that way. *I cannot promise to make you happy on earth* said our Lady to St Bernadette. God desires rather that we should desire salvation, the hereafter, heaven, resurrection, and strive in this world to use his grace to make that possible. So we should not set our eyes on this passing world, but on *our true homeland, which is in heaven, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.* (Colossians 3:1)

Let us pray:

‘O Jesus, you are my true friend, my only friend. You take part in all my misfortunes; you take them on yourself, you know how to change them into blessings. You listen to me with the greatest kindness when I relate my troubles to you, and you have always balm to pour on my wounds. I find you at all times; I find you everywhere. You never go away; if I have to change my dwelling, I find you there wherever I go. You are never weary of listening to me; you are never tired of doing me good. I am certain of being loved by you, if I love you; my goods are nothing to you, and by bestowing yours on me, you never grow poor. However miserable I may be, no one more noble or clever or even holier can come between you and me, and deprive me of your friendship; and death, which tears us away from all other friends, will unite me forever to you. All the humiliations attached to old age or to the loss of honour will never detach you from me; on the contrary, I shall then enjoy You more fully, and you will never be closer to me than when everything seems to conspire against me, to overwhelm me, and to cast me down. You bear with all my faults with extreme patience, and even my want of fidelity and my ingratitude do not wound you to such a degree as to make you unwilling to receive me back when I return to you. O Jesus, grant that I may die praising you, that I may die loving you, that I may die for the love of you. Amen.’ (St Claude de la Colombière)

Words to reflect on

My song is love unknown, my Saviour's love to me,
 Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be.
 O who am I, that for my sake
 my Lord should take frail flesh and die?

He came from his blest throne salvation to bestow,
 But men made strange,
 and none the longed-for Christ would know.
 But O, my friend, my friend indeed,
 who at my need his life did spend.

Sometimes they strew his way
 and his sweet praises sing;
 Resounding all the day hosannas to their King.
 Then 'Crucify!' is all their breath
 and for his death they thirst and cry.

Why, what hath my Lord done?
 What makes this rage and spite?
 He made the lame to run,
 he gave the blind their sight.
 Sweet injuries!
 Yet they at these themselves displease,
 and 'gainst him rise.

They rise, and needs will have
 my dear Lord made away;
 A murderer they save,

the Prince of Life they slay.
 Yet cheerful he to suffering goes that he his foes
 from thence might free.

In life, no house, no home
 my Lord on earth might have:
 In death, no friendly tomb but what a stranger gave.
 What may I say? Heaven was his home
 but mine the tomb wherein he lay.

Here might I stay and sing, no story so divine,
 Never was love, dear King,
 never was grief like thine.
 This is my friend, in whose sweet praise
 I all my days could gladly spend.
(Samuel Crossman (c.1624-83))

Hold my hand, O Lord, in this lonely place; help me to
 know that I am never alone because you are with me
 always. When the world seems frightening, be my
 strength O God, my rock, my fortress, my strong
 defender, my friend.

For meditation this week*Psalm 21 (22)**Psalm 62 (63)**Matthew 11:25-30**1 Corinthians 13**1 John 4:7-21*

Next Sunday's Gospel

Year A: *John 11:1-45*Year B: *John 12:20-30*Year C: *John 8:1-11***To do this week**

1. Today is Mother's Day. Don't forget! If your parents are dead, do you pray for them, have Masses celebrated for them?
2. Identify some person who is lonely, for whatever reason, and make some gesture of affection. Make that phone call, write that letter, go and see them if you can.
3. Our Lenten resolutions? Day off today: it's Laetare Sunday. Enjoy yourself!

————— ✠ THE FIFTH WORD ✠ —————
FROM THE CROSS

“I thirst.”

‘Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfil the scripture), “I thirst.” A bowl full of vinegar stood there; so they put a sponge full of the vinegar on hyssop and held it to his mouth.’” (*John 19:28-29 (RSV)*)

Thirsting

Almost invariably, sermons on this word from the cross have been concerned with our Lord's thirst for souls. You can see what it is all about; the whole purpose of our Lord's sacrifice was precisely to save souls, and this word is a good peg to hang this theme on. But I would like to be rather more obvious, if you don't mind, and talk about hunger and thirst, pure and simple.

No doubt your Parish Priest has spoken to you within the last few weeks about the importance of almsgiving, especially in Lent; in this diocese a few years ago our Bishop even sent us a pastoral letter about it, encouraging us to buy fair trade products as one very practical way of doing good. And this is very good and Lenten; indeed it is very good and Christian, and ought to be an important feature of our ongoing spiritual lives.

The dreadful tsunami that so shocked us at the end of 2004 put so much into perspective. A sadness in my own life around the same time, which I thought pretty horrid when it happened, was put into perspective for me by a friend living in Thailand who quite simply (though kindly) told me to get over myself; compared to what he had seen, (he is a loss adjuster for an insurance company) my own troubles were trifling. And that is quite right. To see our woes in perspective is one of the most healthy things to do; I often wonder whether in fact it is one of the things that is really spiritually most healing at Lourdes, where one can always find others worse off who are coping better. In that way, we learn and grow.

It was so encouraging, wasn't it, to see so many people willing to inconvenience themselves for the sake of those caught up in that tsunami? It was one of those rare occasions that one finds oneself proud of one's fellow human beings. I suppose that it was the sheer immediacy of the need, the startling suddenness of the tragedy, that caught our imaginations and caused us to empty our pockets.

And yet, as the Prime Minister commented at the time, Africa suffers a tsunami every day. In other words, the tragedy that was a one-off occurrence (let us hope and pray) in the East, is daily repeated in Africa, in terms of the loss of life-though in this case to war, famine or disease. Consider, for example, the continuing drought

and consequent loss of harvests in Lesotho, a relatively little territory bordering South Africa. As a result of the worldwide reaction to the tsunami disaster, aid to Lesotho fell to a critical level; lives unquestionably have been lost. But Lesotho is not in the forefront of peoples' minds; there has always been famine in Africa, people have always died. This is how we reason with ourselves, and our indifference is shocking. Or it should be shocking.

I hope that you won't resent it if I have made you feel at least a little bit guilty. There is such a thing as good guilt, after all, just as there is such a thing as good pain. Good pain tells me to take my hand off the hot stove, or to go and see a doctor. Good guilt is the spiritual equivalent; it tells me to put right things that are wrong, and nags at me until I do so. There are such things as bad pain and bad guilt, but that is another thing, and I will save it for another occasion.

It is important to be reminded, particularly in Lent, that if somebody has died whose life we could have saved, the Lord will hold us responsible for that death. Our money, even a little money, responsibly and intelligently given, can save lives, and we should not neglect this essential part of our religion.

Who is my neighbour? That question was asked of our Lord (*Luke 10:29ff*); Ladislav Boros gave another possible reply, which I commend to you: my neighbour is the one *whom nobody will help if I don't*.

Let us pray:

Help us, dear Lord, to see the face of your beloved Son in those who suffer. Grant us the sight to see what needs to be done, and the grace to do it, that we, who are nothing without you, may be worthy to live as you wish and come one day to your Kingdom, where you live and reign for ever and ever.

Help us, good Lord, to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to labour and not to seek for rest; to toil and not to ask for any reward save that of knowing that we do thy holy will. Amen.

Words to reflect on

As pants the hart for cooling streams
When heated in the chase,
So longs my soul, O God, for thee,
And thy refreshing grace.

For thee, my God, the living God,
My thirsty soul doth pine:
O when shall I behold thy face,
Thou Majesty Divine!

Why restless, why cast down, my soul?
Hope still, and thou shalt sing
The praise of him who is thy God,
Thy health's eternal spring.

To Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
The God whom we adore,
Be glory, as it was, is now,
And shall be evermore. Amen.

(*N. Tate and N. Brady (based on Psalm 41 [42])*)

O Holy Mary, Mother of God, as the body of your beloved Son was for us stretched on the cross, so may our desires be daily more and more extended in his service, and our hearts wounded with compassion for his most bitter passion; and you, O most Blessed Virgin, grant by your powerful intercession that we may ever follow his example of love unto the end. Amen.

For meditation this week

Psalm 9:9-18

Luke 10:29-37

Matthew 25: 31-46

James 2:1-13

Next Sunday's 'Palm' Gospel

Year A: *Matthew 21:1-11*

Year B: *Mark 11:1-10 / John 12:12-16*

Year C: *Luke 19: 28-40*

To do this week

1. Assess our contributions to charity; are we really giving what we can? Do we know that what we give is actually doing good, and getting to where it is needed?
2. Identify some needy situation in the world and pray daily for its healing.
3. Our Lenten resolutions? Keep going; the end is in sight.

————— ❧ THE SIXTH WORD ❧ —————
FROM THE CROSS

“It is finished.”

‘When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, “It is finished”; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.’
(*John 19:30* (RSV))

Passover

There are a number of ways one can look at this sixth Word of our Lord from the cross. The first sense is seeing it as an end to the pain: At this point, one naturally breathes a sigh of relief; having followed through the account of his torments, the words that signal that the suffering is over are welcome. We say sometimes, don’t we, that somebody’s death is a ‘happy release’ when suffering has been considerable.

A second meaning, by no means excluding the first meaning, is the most common, and I suppose the most instinctive, approach seeing this simple phrase as referring to the work of salvation; as he prepared to breathe his last, our Lord knew that he had achieved what he had set out to do; humanity was redeemed, the work was done. However, this interpretation does have a

drawback; we believe that our Lord's resurrection also had a part to play in our redemption, and so in that sense, although the suffering was almost finished, the work of salvation was not yet complete.

But the scriptural commentary of Scott Hahn gave me another possible explanation, which I find both ingenious and interesting. Although there are some scholars who dispute it, I think it is clear from both the scriptures and the tradition that the last supper was a Paschal, or Passover meal. Passover was on the Saturday, which began at sunset on (Good) Friday. Friday, then was Passover preparation day, beginning at sunset on (Maundy) Thursday, on which day the lambs for the Passover meal were sacrificed in the temple. If our Lord were to anticipate the day of Passover, and eat the Paschal meal on the Thursday, then there would very likely have been no Paschal lamb. The thought of a Passover meal without the lamb was unthinkable, so instead,

'...as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's

kingdom." And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives'. (*Matthew 26:26-30(RSV)*)

In other words, our Lord took the place of the Paschal lamb, the innocent one who set people free.

There were four cups of wine at a Paschal meal, and the one shared seems to have been the third, after which our Lord said that he would taste no more wine for now. Was that drink of sour wine, vinegar, that our Lord tasted on the cross the fourth cup of the Passover? In this case, our Lord's comment that *it is finished* might refer to the Passover meal. This ties our Lord's sacrifice on the cross very firmly to the last supper as being of one unit; he identifies himself with the Passover lamb, the innocent one sacrificed so that others may go free; the *Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*. And at the hour he died, the temple was busy with the sacrifice of Passover lambs.

This weekend, the liturgy changes character as we enter Holy Week. As we commemorate the Lord's solemn entry into Jerusalem, the holy city, our minds are inevitably drawn towards the events of the *Triduum*; Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. This is as it should be, for all these events are of a piece. We know what the crowds do not, that our Lord was not entering in triumph to claim an earthly kingdom, but to initiate a heavenly one, and a new covenant in his blood. Perhaps, then, this was what our Lord meant when he said it is finished; perhaps, with the Jerusalem Bible it

might be better translated *it is accomplished*, meaning the covenant is made, sealed with the blood of a lamb innocent and without sin, and God and humanity are restored to friendship by the sacrifice of the one who loves us more than we could possibly imagine.

Let us pray:

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,
have mercy on us.

‘O my sweet Saviour Christ, which in thine undeserved love towards mankind, so kindly wouldst suffer the painful death of the cross, suffer not me to be cold nor lukewarm in love again towards thee.’
(*St Thomas More*)

Soul of my Saviour, sanctify my breast,
Body of Christ, be thou my saving guest,
Blood of my Saviour, bathe me in thy tide,
Wash me with water flowing from thy side.

Strength and protection may thy passion be,
O blessed Jesu, hear and answer me;
Deep in thy wounds, Lord, hide and shelter me,
So shall I never, never part from thee.

Guard and defend me from the foe malign,
In death’s dread moments make me only thine;
Call me and bid me come to thee on high
Where I may praise thee with thy saints for aye.
(*Anima Christi*)

Jesus Christ, my Leman* sweet
That diedest on the bitter tree,
With all my might I thee beseech
For thy deep woundès two and three,
That as firmly may thy love
Into mine heart fixèd be
As was the spear into thine Heart
When thou sufferedst death for me.
My Jesu sweet, who died on Rood,
For the love of me,
And boughtest me with thy Blood,
Have then mercy upon me;
And should me hinder any thing
From my love of thee,
Should it be dear, it shall be loathed;
So take it away from me. Amen.
(*Vernon Manuscript*)

* Leman is an ancient word for beloved; the author here is punning on the word lemon, a bitter fruit.

For meditation this week

One a day; the seven penitential *Psalms*:

6, 31 (32),

37 (38), 50 (51),

101 (102), 129 (130),

142 (143)

1 *Corinthians* 11:17-34

This Sunday's Passion

Year A: *Matthew* 26:14-27:66

Year B: *Mark* 14:1-15:47

Year C: *Luke* 22:14-23:56

and Friday's Passion *John* 18:1-19:42

To do this week

1. Prepare for Easter with a good examination of conscience, preparatory to a good confession.
2. The Easter communion is the most important of the year; it should be prepared well.
3. Be determined to attend all the ceremonies of the Triduum possible.

— ❧ THE SEVENTH WORD ❧ —
FROM THE CROSS

“Father, into thy hands
I commit my spirit.”

‘It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last. Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, and said, “Certainly this man was innocent!” And all the multitudes who assembled to see the sight, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts.’ (*Luke* 23:44-48 (RSV))

Correcting disobedience

Mary Queen of Scots died with these words on her lips, and indeed there must be many throughout history who also did so, taking their cue from the last words of our Lord. The Church prays these words every night in the Office of Compline, adjoining the phrase ‘You have redeemed us, Lord God of truth,’ and at Easter time, this seems a good place to start our meditation on this last word from the Cross.

Having passed through the desert of Lent, with its successes and failures, we finally accompanied our Lord through his Passion, sharing in the remembrance of the Last Supper and his agony in the garden of Gethsemane. On Good Friday, we listened to St John's account of our Lord's death and burial, and no doubt were moved once more, as always on this day. We kissed the feet of the crucified one in an act of our own sorrow, and received the foretaste and pledge of redemption in our reception of Holy Communion.

And all was dead for a day. Our Lord committed his spirit into his Father's hands and breathed his last. Though we naturally enter into the spirit of all this, trying to see Jesus as one crucified and dead, yet we know what really happened. Whereas Holy Saturday ought to be a day when nothing is done, somehow our parish church is a hive of activity, with cleaners, flower-arrangers, clergy, servers, sacristans all flurrying to prepare for what is really the focus of the last forty days; the celebration of the resurrection of our Lord. This is what it is really about.

I'd like us to consider the real weight of these last words from the cross. I suppose that many of us see the phrase *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit* as meaning, effectively, 'Father, here I come, please catch me', if that doesn't sound too irreverent. Actually, I think the meaning is a great deal deeper. The whole meaning of Christ's sacrifice of himself was to reverse the

disobedience of Adam, in other words of all of humanity whom Adam represents.

For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous. (*Romans 5:19*)

In taking on our nature, and making us part of himself, part of his mystical body, through our reception of the sacraments, especially in our reception of his Eucharistic body ('we become what we receive', said St Augustine), our Lord, too, represents us, not in disobedience, but in obedience. He hands everything over to his Father; his life, his suffering, *and even, finally, his spirit*, and this obedience brought redemption for all us who believe in him and do as he commands, imitating his obedience rather than Adam's disobedience:

'Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.' (*Philippians 2: 5-11*)

We too, then, should hand over everything to God our Father that, having lived and died in Christ, we too shall rise with him:

The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we shall also live with him; if we endure, we shall also reign with him. (2 *Timothy* 2:11-12)

Have a very blessed Easter; thanks you for your company on this Lenten journey; may the death and resurrection of our Saviour bring us all to his heavenly kingdom.

Let us pray:

God be in my head, and in my understanding;
 God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;
 God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;
 God be in my heart, and in my thinking;
 God be at my end, and at my departing.
 (*Sarum Primer, 16th Century*)

Almighty God, who, in the death and glorious resurrection of Christ your Son opened for us the way to salvation, grant that we may also die to our sins and so rise with him to everlasting life. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Words to reflect on

This joyful Eastertide,
 away with sin and sorrow.
 My love, the Crucified,
 hath sprung to life this morrow:

Had Christ, that once was slain,
 ne'er burst his three-day prison,
 Our faith had been in vain:
 but now hath Christ arisen.

My flesh in hope shall rest, and for a season slumber:
 Till trump from east to west
 shall wake the dead in number.

Had Christ, that once was slain,
 ne'er burst his three-day prison,
 Our faith had been in vain: but now hath Christ arisen.

Death's flood hath lost his chill since
 Jesus crossed the river:

Lover of souls, from ill my passing soul deliver:
 Had Christ, that once was slain,
 ne'er burst his three-day prison,
 Our faith had been in vain: but now hath Christ arisen.
 (*G. R. Woodward (1849-1934)*)

Holy Lord, light sprung from the grave, true salvation of your people, teach us obedience to your Father that we may rise with you to eternal life.

For meditation this week

Romans 6:8-23

Romans 8:31-39

Colossians 3:1-4

Matthew 28:1-10

John 20:1-9

To do this week

Christ is risen; celebrate!

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