

Words of Challenge, Words of Life

The Diocese of St Alban's Lent Course 2010



Diocese of St Albans

Words of Challenge, Words of Life

Written by the Bishops of St Albans, Hertford and Bedford

'I'm giving up chocolate this Lent – I need to lose a bit of weight anyway.' Many people think that Lent is about simply giving things up, as though God delights in making our lives more difficult. The true focus of Lent is actually about making more space for God in our lives. We give things up to get rid of the clutter that gets in God's way, so that He can inhabit us more fully. Lent is about hearing afresh God's life-giving words to us. It's about renewing our discipleship of Jesus Christ, which is why we are inviting Christians this Lent to engage in three things.

First, to join a Lent group and reflect with others on the gospel readings which are set for each Sunday. We have written a course which we hope will both inspire and encourage you in your faith. If your church or chaplaincy is not arranging groups, see if you can find one or two other Christians (perhaps from other denominations) to meet together each week to follow this course. The course is set out below, along with some ideas about how you might use the material. For those who would like a bible commentary to give extra background material, we are recommending Wansbrough's Luke: The People's Bible Commentary published by BRF (£7.99).

The course website is at: www.stalbans.anglican.org/Mission/Lent-Course-2010

Second, you may like to participate in Challenge, which complements the Lent Course. We are asking as many people as possible to join us during Lent in daring to make a difference by living the words of Jesus. The idea is to learn some of the words of Jesus Christ by heart each day and then pray that God will give us the chance to put them into action.

Read it, learn it, pray it, do it!

The short daily passages, all taken from the Gospel of Luke, will be downloadable from the internet and can be distributed to members of the youth group or congregation (or in the case of schools, to the pupils). Alternatively you can opt to receive them by text message, email, Twitter or RSS. You will be able to register on the Challenge website at www.challenge2010.org from Advent Sunday. We hope that this challenge will be taken up by people in the churches, as well as seekers and enquirers who would like to explore the words of Jesus Christ. It would be great, for example, to advertise it at Christmas services.

The Challenge website will give further details and ideas about how to make the Challenge a shared exercise within your congregation or among your friends. In particular you will be able to write comments on the website and upload short video clips, via YouTube, so that you can share with others what the passage means to you and how you have lived it out that day.

Third, you are invited to come and join the Easter Monday Pilgrimage on 5th April at the Cathedral in St Albans. This year we are delighted that the community choir from South Oxhey (as featured on the television programme The Choir, led by Gareth Malone) will be with us. You can come by yourself, or with a group. We are inviting all the Lent Groups and those who have done the Challenge to be involved in the Pilgrimage and to make it a way to celebrate and to bring to God all that has been learned, all that has been done and pledges of future action. This will be a wonderful way to express our individual and our corporate commitment to our risen Lord and Saviour, in whose resurrection life we dare to make a difference in our communities and in the world.

Details of the day may be found at www.stalbans.anglican.org/Mission/Easter-Monday-Pilgrimage, and on the Challenge website at www.challenge2010.org

+ Alan St Albans + Richard Bedford + Christopher Hertford



Introduction

Please give a copy of this sheet to each member of the group

In these six sessions we will focus on passages from the gospels. You may have heard them read in church on the previous Sunday and a sermon preached on them. During the week we need to let these passages permeate our lives so that God's grace can gradually transform us. If this is going to happen, we need to engage with scripture, with our hearts and with our minds.

Listening with our hearts

In order to allow God's living word to penetrate our hearts, we suggest using an ancient method of reading the scriptures called 'Holy Reading' (sometimes called Lectio Divina)

- The first stage is reading (lectio) the Word of God slowly and prayerfully. You might like to read the passage around the group, one verse being read in turn by each person. As you read, take note of any words or phrases which particularly strike you.
- The second stage is reflection (meditatio) where we think about the text and ruminate upon it, asking God to speak to us directly.
- The third stage is response (oratio) where we stop analysing the passage and offer our inner responses to the passage to God.
- The last stage is rest (contemplatio) where we listen to God at the deepest levels of our being. We open ourselves up to God and allow him to work in us

This 'listening with our hearts', which may take up to twenty minutes, will mainly be in silence. At the end of this you may like to share with one another what you have been experiencing or reflecting.

Listening with our minds

The second part of the session will be to read the reflections on the passage (one person may read it out loud or you may like to read a paragraph each) and then discuss the questions. At the end of the discussion, allow three minutes for each person to jot down

- One thing that has struck me
- One thing that I want to do
- One thing that I want to pray about or for

The session ends with prayer, enabling each member of the group to pray in their preferred way and to share in ways that others find helpful. This may be extemporary prayer, silent prayer, listening to a suitable piece of music or using the ancient night office of the church called Compline.

(<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/worship/liturgy/commonworship/texts/daily/night/compline.html>).

Resources:

The separate sites and web pages for the endeavours described in this document are listed below. These can also be accessed via a link on the home page of the Diocesan website at: www.stalbans.anglican.org

The Lent Course:

www.stalbans.anglican.org/Mission/Lent-Course-2010

Easter Monday Pilgrimage:

www.stalbans.anglican.org/Mission/Easter-Monday-Pilgrimage

Challenge 2010:

www.challenge2010.org

Acknowledgements:

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Lent 1

Luke 4. 1-13: The Temptations (NRSV)

The passage

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' ⁴Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."'

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' ⁸Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'

⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", ¹¹and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."'

¹²Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." ' ¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Some reflections

The first Sunday in Lent focuses on the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. It's significant that Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert. Often in Scripture the desert symbolises the absence of God or the place of spiritual loneliness. This contrasts with the mountains where many of the saints encountered God in a special way (and, for some of us today, that is still the case). Sometimes the world in which we try to live out our Christian lives today can feel like a desert. The prophet Isaiah calls for a highway in the desert where God might come (see Isaiah 40:3).

The story of Jesus' temptations might be a familiar one, but it's a mysterious story which we find hard to plumb the depths of. Notice how these special temptations follow on from the story of Jesus' baptism. Jesus has that uplifting spiritual experience - being baptised by John; seeing the dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit; and hearing the gracious voice of God from heaven.

At his baptism, Jesus hears God say, 'This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased'. Now the first words of the devil to Jesus are 'If you are the Son of God...' Two of the temptations start by sowing this seed of doubt. 'Perhaps I am mistaken; perhaps I ought just to check it out again by doing something spectacular.' The temptation is to doubt God. But, it is with sure and certain trust in the word of God that Jesus resists the devil's sly approach. So the mountain-top experience of the baptism is immediately followed by the wilderness valley of temptation. This pattern is often our experience as well. Times of testing; of temptation; of suffering often come hard on the heels of some wonderful spiritual experience. It's just as we think we stand that we are in danger of falling. It's when we are in good spirits that temptation strikes.

We need to make the connection between the temptations that Jesus endured and our own lives. But immediately there's a problem: Have I been tempted to make bread from stones? Or to worship Satan? Or to throw myself off a high place because I know I'm safe in God's hands? So what are we to make of these temptations? How do they



impinge on our experience?

Questions for discussion

1. What are the words of challenge in this passage? What are the words of life?
2. Read verses 3 and 4. This temptation is to see life as nothing but the material. How can we resist this? How does our faith enrich our view of life?
3. 'It's all about power.' (Verses 5-8). Many of the problems we face in human relationships inside and outside the church are connected to the abuse of power. How can we get a balance between using our gifts on the one hand, and demonstrating a proper humility on the other?
4. In verses 9-12, there is the temptation to manipulate God. In what ways can we fall into this trap in our prayers?

• Ideas for Action

- Each person to jot down
- One thing that has struck me

What one thing am I going to do?
What one thing will I pray about this week?

Prayer

Spend some time initially in corporate silent prayer.

Reflect on what it is that most easily draws you away from God, and ask for his forgiveness. Pray for his Spirit to enable us to live lives pleasing to God.

You may like, then, to pray for those who are hungry both physically and spiritually; for those who are abusing power and those who are abused by power; and for the worship of God to be at the centre of our lives.

Finish by saying the Collect together, followed by the grace:

Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:
give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit;
and, as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.



Lent 2

Luke 13. 31-35: Jesus laments over Jerusalem (NRSV)

The passage

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.'
³²He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem." ³⁴Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."'

Some reflections

Jesus' ministry is creating waves. The people of Nazareth were outraged at his claims and tried to kill him (Luke 4. 29); Levi the tax collector, a man who was very useful to the occupying Roman forces had left his job to follow Jesus (Luke 5. 27-28); Jesus was upsetting the Jewish religious establishment by healing those who were ritually unclean (Luke 8. 43-48); and he appeared to be teaching a radical social revolution that could lead to unrest (Luke 6. 20-25).

It appears from Jesus' abrupt response ('tell that fox...') that Herod has sent some Pharisees to warn Jesus to get out of his territory. Perhaps Herod hoped to avoid further hassle. Jesus is not willing to be influenced by these very real threats (remember that this is Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea, who has already had John the Baptist executed, John 9.9). Jesus' only concern is to continue doing what God has called him to do. Using the present tense to describe the healing and deliverance which has been the hallmark of his public ministry, he again returns to the theme of 'the third day' (Luke 9.22) when he will complete the work for which he has been sent. It is a subtle prophecy of his forthcoming crucifixion and death.

Jesus then breaks out in a heartfelt prayer for God's chosen people (v.36) who do not want to listen to the words of the prophets. He uses the lovely image of himself as a protective mother hen, which contrasts sharply with the imagery of Herod as a predatory 'fox' (v.32). He finishes with a note of resignation, 'See your house is left to you' (v.35), echoing the words of Jeremiah 'If you do not heed these words...this house shall become a desolation' (Jeremiah 22.5).

Questions for discussion

1. What are the words of challenge in this passage? What are the words of life?
2. Read through the passage and identify the different things we can we learn about Jesus in these verses.
3. Who is he most concerned about?
4. How does Jesus pray in this threatening situation?

Ideas for Action

Each person to jot down

- One thing that has struck me
- What one thing am I going to do?
- What one thing will I pray about this week?

Prayer

Discuss how we can pray for our enemies or those we feel threatened by. You may like to think which psalms may help us with such praying (e.g., Psalm 9 or 119. 153-176).

Also look at the teaching of Jesus Christ in Matthew 5. 1-12. Pray especially for the peace of Jerusalem and for all parts of the world where there is conflict.

You may decide to have extemporary prayer or that each member of the group will write a prayer to be used in the group.

Finish by saying the Collect together, followed by the grace:

Almighty God,
you show to those who are in error the light of your truth,
that they may return to the way of righteousness:
grant to all those who are admitted
into the fellowship of Christ's religion,
that they may reject those things
that are contrary to their profession,
and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same;
through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.



Lent 3

Luke 13. 1-9: Jesus invites repentance (NRSV)

The passage

¹There were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?' ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them - do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?' ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

⁶Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" ⁸He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

Some reflections

This blunt passage might shock us. Two incidents are recalled, apparently well known to some in the crowd, and then Jesus tells a parable which reminds us of John the Baptist's equally direct call to repentance (Luke 3.3).

First there is a conversation about sin. Some people draw Jesus' attention to an outrage. Pilate had mingled the blood of Galilean pilgrims with the blood of the very sacrifices they were coming to make at the Temple (v. 1). We can only speculate, unhelpfully, on how they died. Perhaps because of anti-Roman plotting or to 'encourage' compliance with the authorities. Regardless, we can sense the fate of another Galilean pilgrim at the hand of the same Roman official.

Jesus then gives another example of innocent suffering (v. 4) but this time it is of some people from Jerusalem, subtly ensuring that there is no Jerusalem snobbery over country Galileans in this serious business of sinning. Jesus makes it quite clear that the victims of severe and degrading death and those who die as a result of calamitous accident are not worse "sinners" (v. 2) or "offenders" (v. 4) than any others in Jerusalem or Galilee. Sternly Jesus issues a comprehensive call to repentance (v. 5).

The parable of the fig tree indicates that time for repentance is short. John the Baptist had been equally emphatic when he issued a similar call (Luke 3. 7-9). Whether the year's respite is a sign of God's mercy, prompted here by the gardener in much the same way as the Syrophenician woman had prompted compassion (Matthew 15. 24-28), or as God's patience close to exhaustion, the urgency is very clear (v. 9). The parable of the fig tree sets before us both judgement and hope.



Questions for discussion

1. What are the words of challenge in this passage? What are the words of life?
2. By now we might be bored or irritated by Lent's discipline – spiritual and practical. Share with each other, as you feel able, your experiences of Lent so far.
3. The approach (sometimes called a theodicy) that suggests suffering might be 'deserved', as in verses 1- 4, takes us into a blind alley. What does the cross of Calvary have to tell us about the nature of suffering?
4. Sometimes we are tempted to pass the buck about sin by blaming others or making excuses. First John the Baptist and then Jesus made personal, individual calls to repentance. Talk about how we can support each other in facing our sin, being careful to respect each others' dignity.

Ideas for Action

Each person to jot down

- One thing that has struck me
- What one thing am I going to do?
- What one thing will I pray about this week?

Prayer

Take 3 or 4 minutes in silence to reflect on Lent so far. Then pray for humility, patience and commitment to keep turning towards God. Finally pray together for those who are victims of human atrocity and natural disasters, especially those in the news this week.

Finish by saying the Collect together, followed by the grace:

Almighty God,
whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain,
and entered not into glory before he was crucified:
mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross,
may find it none other than the way of life and peace;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.



Lent 4

Luke 15. 1-3; 11b-32: The prodigal son (NRSV)

The passage

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' ³ So he told them this parable:

^{11b} 'There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them.

¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with* the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' " ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."* ²²But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ 'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" ³¹Then the father* said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." '

Some reflections

Some years ago, I saw a drama group re-enact the story of the prodigal son. All proceeds as expected - the son leaves home; spends all his money; falls on hard times; eats the pigs-swill; comes to his senses, and decides to return to his father. The father runs to meet him and says, 'Get lost, you lousy good for nothing spendthrift. If you think I'm going to welcome you back here you've got another think coming.' Stunned silence – then someone planted in audience shouts out, 'But that's not what happens...' Narrator: 'Surely you can't believe he would be welcomed back after all that.' The point is made - that's exactly how much God loves each and every human being. We are so familiar with the story we expect the son to be welcomed back - but the first time the story was told, the shock was that he was welcomed back at all. Perhaps the parable ought to be called 'the Loving Father' rather than 'the prodigal son' or even better, 'the two brothers'.

The whole story will ring bells for many in the area of sibling rivalry or jealousy, and has something important to teach us about coping with dysfunctional family life. Jesus' prime concern, though, is to give a powerful portrayal of the nature of God's love for wayward humanity.

The two sons provide different pictures of the ways God's love can be received. For some, the reality of that love is a discovery after a life of either disobedience or indifference. It's then often an intense and vivid experience. For others it's less intense because that sense of God's grace has always been there, like well-loved background music. Sometimes, as in this story, there can be tensions because of a lack of understanding of the other's experience.

Questions for discussion

1. What are the words of challenge in this passage? What are the words of life?
2. Which of the sons do you identify with most easily?
How does that reflect your own relationship with God?
3. What does this story teach about the nature of repentance?
4. Reflect on the generosity of the love of the father portrayed here.
5. Think about the contrasting attitudes of the father and the elder son.
What do they teach us about the nature of forgiveness?

Ideas for Action

Each person to jot down

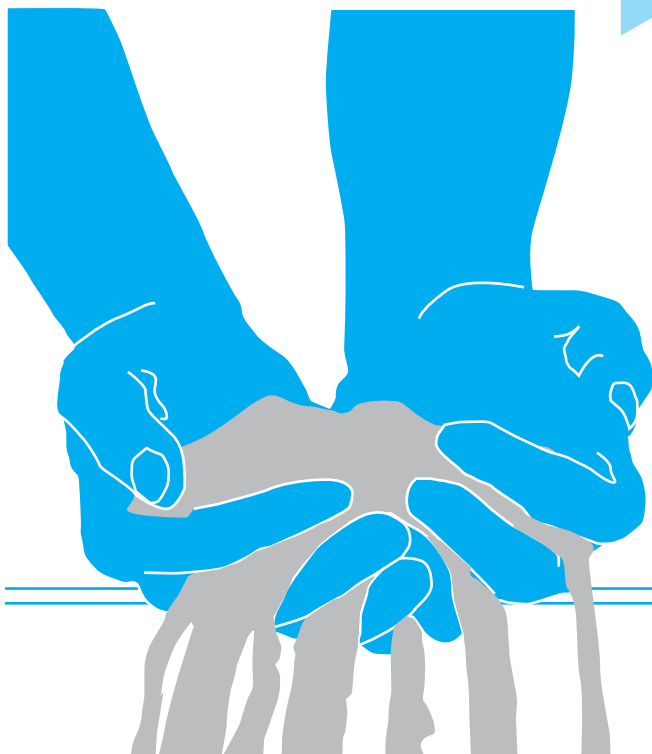
- One thing that has struck me
- What one thing am I going to do?
- What one thing will I pray about this week?

Prayer

Praise:	Spend a little time praising God and thanking him for the love he has revealed to you.
Confession:	Ask God to forgive you for the times you've been jealous of other Christians and their spiritual experience, or resented them.
Rededication:	Rededicate yourselves afresh to God's service this Lent.

Finish by saying the Collect together, followed by the grace:

Merciful Lord,
absolve your people from their offences,
that through your bountiful goodness
we may all be delivered from the chains of those sins
which by our frailty we have committed;
grant this, heavenly Father,
for Jesus Christ's sake, our blessed Lord and Saviour,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.



Lent 5

John 12. 1-8: Mary Anoints Jesus (NRSV)

The passage

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

Some reflections

Bethany is on the east side of Jerusalem. It is a poor area and the prevailing winds come from the west, bringing the city's pollution over the village. Today Bethany, which is a Palestinian town, is separated by a wall from Jerusalem.

The reference to Lazarus's death (v.1) hints that the Passover, which is to follow in six days time, will also be a time of death. At that point Jesus' body will be anointed (John 19.39-40) as a form of embalming. This anointing in Bethany, which brings together elements from the two accounts recorded in Mark 14. 3-9 and Matthew 26. 6-13, points forward to that event.

Mary comes with 'a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard' (v.3) which would have been extremely expensive. This extravagance is a theme in John's gospel: the huge amounts of wine at the wedding at Cana (2.6) and the twelve baskets of bread left over after the feeding of the crowds (6.12).

Mary does not anoint Jesus' head as would be expected, but his feet. This was how one prepared a body for burial. In Jewish custom women did not wear their hair loose except sometimes when in mourning, which again points ahead to what is to come. This episode also looks forward to the foot washing. Of all his followers Mary is the only one who has understood the real teaching of Jesus and she attends to his feet even before he asks (13.14).

Judas is outraged at the waste of money (300 denarii was about nine months' wages) which, we are told, he would have like to have stolen (v. 6). Jesus is not saying that they should fulfil their religious obligations and give alms to the poor, but they should be aware that he was going to leave them before long to go the way of the cross.



Questions for discussion

1. What are the words of challenge in this passage? What are the words of life?
2. What does the passage tell us about the main characters: Mary, Martha, Jesus and Judas?
3. We are given pictures of two contrasting people: Mary who simply gives of herself and Judas who only thinks about himself. How can we grow in self-forgetfulness and in genuine love?
4. 'To give and not to count the cost'. How do we balance our devotion to God (such as our giving to the church) and the care of the poor (such as giving to charity)?

Ideas for Action

Each person to jot down

One thing that has struck me

What one thing am I going to do?

What one thing will I pray about this week?

Prayer

Our praying this week might begin with confession for the times when we have been more concerned about ourselves rather than others.

Pray for the Palestinian community in Bethany and for the demolition of walls which separate communities.

Pray that we may be given a love for God which overflows in generosity.

Ask God for the gift of inner strength that we may do what we know we should do.

Finish by saying the Collect together, followed by the grace:

Most merciful God,
who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ
delivered and saved the world:
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross
we may triumph in the power of his victory;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.



Lent 6 (Palm Sunday)

Luke 23. 1-49: The Passion (NRSV)

The passage

¹Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. ²They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.' ³Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He answered, 'You say so.' ⁴Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.' ⁵But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.' ⁶When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. ⁷And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. ⁸When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. ⁹He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. ¹²That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies. ¹³Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, ¹⁴and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶I will therefore have him flogged and release him.'

¹⁷Now he was obliged to release someone for them at the festival. ¹⁸Then they all shouted out together, 'Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!' ¹⁹(This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) ²⁰Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; ²¹but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!' ²²A third time he said to them, 'Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.' ²³But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. ²⁴So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. ²⁵He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished. ²⁶As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸But Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For the days are surely coming when they will say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed." ³⁰Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us"; and to the hills, "Cover us." ³¹For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?' ³²Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.

³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.' ³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' ⁴²Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' ⁴³Jesus replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.' ⁴⁴It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, 'Certainly this man was innocent.'

⁴⁸And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. ⁴⁹But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Some reflections

As early as the temptations in the wilderness (Lent 1), the nature of Jesus' mission and ministry was put to the test. He declined the quick fix, where the end justifies the means, for the way of love and truth. Here, as we move towards the cross, the consequences become clear. Pilate faces his own test and reacts very differently. Luke portrays Jesus as a guiltless victim, whose innocence Pilate repeatedly asserts (v. 4, vv. 14 & 15, v. 23), but he takes the populist trimming approach. Meanwhile Herod treats it all as a joke; Luke recalls that he, not Pilate as elsewhere, mocked Jesus' kingship by dressing him in royal robes (v. 11). So Pilate sees through the malicious accusations against Jesus, of being what he explicitly has declined to be (v. 2), but does not have the stature or character to stand by his judgement.

So Jesus is crucified. Notice particularly the response of those on the hillside at Calvary. Jesus himself is forgiving (v. 34) as he has been throughout his ministry (e.g., Luke 5. 24; 7. 48; 15. 21-23). The crowd is curious at a vulgar public execution, the soldiers are callous and frivolous, one criminal launches a vindictive tirade while the other shows sharp perception. All reveal their calibre, or lack of it. Jesus goes to the cross, where he dies as he lived. In his moment of ultimate test, adversity and decision, there is no trimming or turning.

Questions for discussion or reflection

1. What are the words of challenge in this passage? What are the words of life?
2. The crowd acclaims Jesus as Messiah on Palm Sunday but soon bays for his life.
Where do we see examples of crowd mentality today?
3. Do we see examples in our world of reactions similar to those of the people by the cross?
4. If Herod and Pilate made poor use of authority, how can we show judgement and courage in decision making?

Ideas for Action

Each person to jot down
One thing that has struck me
What one thing am I going to do?
What one thing will I pray about this week?

Prayer

- Pray about some of the challenging issues in our society and world this week. Pray particularly for those who carry the burden of government, understanding complexity, elected by the people, but answerable to God.
- Then, in a few minutes silence, make a personal prayer to stay close to Jesus this Holy Week.

Finish by saying the Collect together, followed by the grace:

Almighty and everlasting God,
who in your tender love towards the human race
sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ
to take upon him our flesh
and to suffer death upon the cross:
grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility,
and also be made partakers of his resurrection;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.