



Meditations
FOR LENT

2009 Edition

THE EDITOR'S PAGE

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Being able to write the Editor's Page is the joy as well as privilege of any editor. Joy because the end of a writing project is in sight and we can celebrate each other's journey of writing – with all its pains and gains! Privilege (that comes with trepidation) because we are able to witness the birth of something beyond the writers and that will take a life of its own once they reach the hands of the readers -YOU. Afterall, "...the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Heb 4:12)

We pray that Lent Meditation 2009 will offer you a new texture to your meditation experience. Please take some time to read through the notes we have prepared for you in 'How To Use Lent Meditation 2009' before you begin. It will give you an overview of the Meditation exercises and theme. Our main purpose this year is that you may spend the lent season becoming more attentive and aware of the presence of God in and around you. We hope that you will nurture your senses so that you may begin to see, hear, feel, smell and touch all that is around you and encounter Christ in unexpected places, unexpected times. We also hope that you may sharpen your intuition and imagination as you immerse yourself in the narratives of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ so that you may deepen your understanding of the way of the Cross, hence, the meaning of the cross and His death for you and I.

May you find this year's lent season as a time of the Lord's invitation to you to see and hear Him more clearly, love Him more dearly and follow Him more closely.

I am indebted to all the writers who contributed to the meditation pieces.

To James Koh for his candid reflection of his life as well as his dedication to HIV-related work and the way he sees Christ through his patients. I am deeply touched and challenged by his attentiveness to life and to his love for God and for those he is called to minister.

THE EDITOR'S PAGE

To Alvin Ung for his thoughtful choosing and reflection of the Desert Fathers, even in the midst of life transition and travels between continents. His ever-readiness to share, to listen, to ask questions and to offer suggestions in writing as a community have brought much depth and meaning to this project.

To Siew Lan, whose openness to the journey of writing has greatly encouraged me. So much of who she is and what she has taught me is personified in the many prayers of the saints she has chosen for our reflection in this project.

These writers are at different places in their journey as writers. May their willingness and attentiveness to life and to Him where they are at, spur you on in your own spiritual journey with the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us not forget that we, (whether writers or readers) afterall, are all beginners – in our love for Him and for our neighbors. There is still room to learn.

Ng Wai Ling
Editor
Lent Meditation 2009

FOREWORD

When the present Board of Worship and Music TRAC took office in 2005, one of the projects we set for ourselves was to produce a book of Meditations for Lent each year. We believed that Lent was an important part of our Christian heritage and liturgical calendar and we wanted to encourage, in particular Methodist Christians, observe the season of Lent, reverently and faithfully and thus help in their faith-journey with Jesus as Saviour and Lord of their lives. Furthermore, we wanted to do this with a team of local writers. I am pleased to tell you that we have been successful in our endeavours.

Praise be to God!

‘Meditations for Lent 2009’ is another in our annual series. In this book, we offer to you humbly, food for the journey - some tasty, some rather unpalatable. Some you will take with big bites, others you may want to just nibble at. Whatever, we hope that you will bite and chew and taste, before you swallow. This food is for you - to nourish you, to replenish your depleting stores, and to help you grow, in Christlikeness. So don’t deprive yourself of this food. Make time each day, open this book and the Word of God, and feed on them slowly. Let the word of God get in to you, to change you and to grow you.

I want to thank Wai Ling, Siew Lan, James Koh and Alvin Ung for sharing their Christian faith-journeys with us in these writings. Your love for the saints is commendable and much appreciated.

I want to thank the members of the Board of Worship and Music (2005-2008) – Ng Su-Yin, Susan Tan, Charles Tan, Daniel Khoo, Liew Cow Yuan, Kathleen Fong, Rev. Yong Wai Yin and Rev. Ashok Amarasingham – for their partnership in the work of the gospel. It’s been a great joy and privilege working with all of you!

“Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.” 1 Corinthians 15:58, NRSV.
Shalom!

Dr. Samuel Ong Boon Leng
Chairman
Board of Worship and Music TRAC

HOW TO USE LENT MEDITATION 2009

The following notes have been prepared to help you use this lent meditation more effectively.

1. What is the Season of Lent?

The Season of Lent originated in the fourth century of the church. It spans 40 weekdays beginning Ash Wednesday and climaxing during Holy Week with Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and concluding Saturday before Easter. Originally, Lent was a time of preparation for those who were to be baptized, as a time for preparation, study and prayer before their baptism at Easter. But since these new members were to be received into a living community of Faith, the entire community was called to preparation.

Today, Lent is marked by a time of prayer and preparation for Easter. The number 40 is connected with many biblical events, especially with the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness preparing for His ministry. Most people spend this period as a time for introspection, self-examination and repentance.

2. What is the Theme for Lent Meditation 2009

The Theme for Lent Meditation 2009 is *'Have You Seen Him?'* We hope the next 40-day meditations will help you increase this awareness of Him through:



Reflections of the Ordinary

We encourage you to look at daily life as a place to be aware of God's presence. This section is a reflection on life's ordinariness and everyday-ness. Most of the reflections are musings of the author as he considers his vocation, his family, his interaction with people and life in light of His relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. This section is written with candidness and will connect with anyone who reflects on life's ordinariness and everyday-ness. **May you see Him in your own life's ordinariness and everyday-ness.**

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Reflections on The Sayings of the Desert Fathers

We wish to introduce to you the wisdom of the desert fathers whose extremely disciplined lives opened up their awareness of God that led to gaining wisdom. The ‘Desert Fathers’ was a movement in the fourth century where few serious Christians felt called to literally obey Jesus’ words to the rich young ruler. They gave up everything, rejected middle-class wealth, walked away from the power of Christendom and went into the desert of northern Egypt. There they spent their time in prayer, basket-weaving, scripture meditation and spiritual direction. Their goal was intimacy with God and love for neighbor. These sayings are a collection of their wisdom. (There is a more in-depth write up on the Sayings of the Desert Fathers at the appendix section). **May you be inspired by and drawn to the source of their wisdom – God Himself.**



Reflections on the Prayers of the Heart

We want to invite you to interact with the heart of the saints who opened their hearts to God in prayer. The Prayers of the Heart is a collection of prayers of the saints, liturgical prayers and scriptural prayers. Some of these prayers have been crafted to music and made into hymns and others are considered as classic collections of spiritual writers over different periods of centuries depicting their honest prayer-responses to the Lord. **May you see Him in their prayers and in turn lead you to respond to Him from the deepest place of your own soul.**



Reflections on the Stations of the Cross

And as you become familiar with the rhythm of paying attention to Him, may that help you to immerse with the meditations of the last days of Christ as He journeyed to the Cross. The stations of the cross began as a devotional exercise in the early centuries, when pious Christians made the journey to Jerusalem in order to walk in the steps of Christ along the Via Dolorosa. (name of a street in the city of Old Jerusalem, which means ‘way of suffering’.) Soon it became an increasingly dangerous pilgrimage, and there arose the practice of erecting pictures of the journey to Golgotha in churches in southern Europe – at first in Spain, then Italy. It is an opportunity to contemplate, exercise and examine ourselves on the way to Golgotha – the path that Jesus walked

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on the way to Jerusalem. Traditionally there are fourteen stations of the cross. For this Lent meditation purpose, we have selected ten stations that are based on the Gospel's narrative of Christ' journey to the Cross. **May scripture help you see Him more clearly, love Him more dearly and follow Him more closely.**

All four sections are interspersed throughout the 40 days. Each reflection is clearly marked by the icon to indicate to readers the type and nature of reflection for the day. We hope that you can experience a variety of meditation styles and understand the depth and breadth of our human expressions in worship and prayer to the One who created our souls. May the experience deepen your own journey with Him and your love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

4. Format

Sunday as a Review of the Week - 40 days begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on the Saturday just before Easter. Each of the weekdays up till Saturday will have a meditation piece. There are no meditation texts on Sundays. We invite you to take Sunday as a Day of Review of the week.

Further Lent Reading – included for each day's meditation is the additional daily scripture passages for further reading. They generally follow the Lectionary reading.

5. What spiritual disciplines will help you in this duration?

- i. **Space and Time** – Set aside a fixed hour and place for the 40 days
- ii. **Silence and Solitude** – Craft out the fixed time and space to withdraw from crowds and noise
- iii. **Scriptural Meditation and Prayer** – use each meditation for the purpose of reflection that will open your heart and Spirit to His Truth in prayer
- iv. **Journaling** – Be disciplined in journaling your experience, conversations with the Lord, movements of your own hearts, significant impressions, etc
- v. **Review of the Week** – Spend Sunday to review the week before to see where He has taken you on this Lent journey with Him. Pay attention to His presence in your life.

Ng Wai Ling
Editor

Lent Meditation 2009



THE PIANIST

Meditation Text: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" - Matt. 13:9

I am a quiet person in that I prefer my surrounding to be quiet, especially after a long trying day at work.

On one such day, I had a stress filled day at work followed by an equally stressful drive home in torrential rain. I got home feeling tired, smelly and hungry.

We settled down to have dinner while Darlene, my 9 year old daughter, started playing the piano, banging mercilessly on the keys, making any conversation with my wife over the dinner table virtually impossible. I endured it for a while, hoping that she would be done with her repertoire before I finished dinner so I can have some time to chat with my wife, but she went on and on and on.

Finally I asked my wife (or rather shouted above the din) "Hadn't she practiced this afternoon on her piano?"

To which she replied "She isn't practicing, she is PLAYING FOR YOU!!"

And suddenly, as if by magic, noise became music and the merciless thumping of amateur fingers on the ebony and ivory keys became a labour of love and my tiredness left me.

At the end of my dinner, and her repertoire, my girl turned to me and asked

"Did you enjoy your dinner?"

Yes I did, very much indeed.

Thank you Darlene.

"God loves you"

"God sent Jesus for you"

"Jesus lived, taught and died for you"

"Jesus fought and gave His life for you and won"

"Jesus is risen. He will be back"

These are sound bites we hear over and over again, so much so they lose their significance, and fade into background noise and a source of personal irritation for some. This Lent, let us open our 'ears' to hear.

Can you hear Him?

Over To You

Sit and reflect on the above Truths as you begin your Lent season. What is the Lord inviting you to? Journal your response as a prayer.



A FRESH BEGINNING

Meditation Text: Abba Poemen said about Abba Pior that every single day he made a fresh beginning

The desert saints struggled with boredom. They lived year after year in the same place, eating the same bread and stew, weaving baskets, praying, rising and sleeping. In the same way, we may feel that life is an endless cycle of rising, going to work, attending meetings, returning home, unwinding and going to bed.

Abba Pior saw things differently. He saw the dawn of each new day as an explosion of new possibilities for starting afresh. Abba Pior believed with all his heart that Jesus was constantly “making everything new” (Rev. 21:5).

If we fell into sin yesterday, with Jesus’ forgiveness, today we begin anew. If we experienced failed relationships with colleagues and loved ones this past week, with Jesus’ help we begin anew. Did yesterday’s events and encounters with people fill us with anxiety? Today we can experience the very same things as the rich variety of ways in which God makes His presence known to us.

The season of Lent is a time of repentance and renewal. How will you make a fresh beginning?

Today’s Response

Are there any specific areas in your life that feel stuck, static or stagnated? Anything that needs confessing? Lift these to the Lord, praying by faith that Jesus is renewing your life.

Spiritual Discipline (*a daily exercise you may wish to practice for at least several months until it becomes natural to you*):

Train your senses daily to take in the beauty of creation. What do you see, hear or smell? Take a moment during your day to look at trees, listen to bird-song or smell a flower. Ask God to renew your senses and help you become more attuned to creation (as well as relationships).



BLESS THE LORD

Meditation Text: "Let everything that has breath, praise the Lord." - Psalm 150

*O For a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer's praise
The glories of my God and King
The triumphs of His grace*

*My gracious Master and my God,
Assist me to proclaim,
To spread thru all the earth abroad
The honours of Thy name.*

*He breaks the power of canceled sin
He sets the prisoner free
His blood can make the foulest clean
His blood availed for me.*

- Charles Wesley -

Meditation

It is generally agreed that Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley have been the two most influential writers of English hymnody. This hymn was written in 1749, as he remembered his own Aldersgate conversion experience. It is thought to have been inspired by a remark by Peter Bohler, an influential Moravian leader, who exclaimed, "Had I a thousand tongues, I would praise Christ Jesus with all of them."

The Lord God is worthy of our praise, worship and adoration. This praise and worship is more than mouthing lyrics of songs. Its richness needs to be cultivated. How do you cultivate the sense of reverence, awe and wonder?

Take the rest of your prayer time to praise the rich glories of the Lord, bless Him and count your blessings.

Prayer

*Lord Jesus Christ, who for us endured the
horror of deep darkness;
Teach us by the depth of your agony,
the vileness of our sin,
and so bind us to yourself
in bonds of gratitude and love,
That we may be united with you
in your perfect sacrifice,
our Saviour, our Lord and our God.*

- William Temple -



THE HUMAN JOURNEY

Meditation Text: Matthew 26:36-41

First Station: Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane

The opening scene of Mel Gibson's movie 'Passion of Christ' depicts very vividly the turmoil and sorrow of the Lord Jesus Christ at the Garden of Gethsemane. It would be his final leg of the journey as He headed towards the cross. He must have known that the mission He was sent on earth is becoming clearer, nearer and surer. All that He has spoken and prophesied to his disciples will now come to pass. It was at the Garden of Gethsemane, as He wrestled in prayer, that He encountered conflict of the human heart and possibly, the taunting and temptation of the evil one. He asked of the Father, 'if possible, let this cup be removed...' Yet it is in the grappling, that He surrendered to His Father and took the ultimate step of obedience, 'Yet not my will, but yours be done.'

The crucial fact for us is this. The Lord Jesus Christ at the final leg of His journey to the Cross struggled like any other human instinctively would do, in fighting against any painful death and separation. This gives a renewed sense of reality of the human soul for us. It tells us that indeed Jesus was as human as any of us. And therefore, the walk to the cross was not a simple, self-heroic, fearless and magic-of-a-wand journey. It was no flippant journey and he was no hero. He took a human journey as the son of man to bear our sins for our sake.

And as the Son of God, He surrendered in obedience to the Father by an act of the will.

The final call we are to heed is one that requires a conscious act of obeying and following of Him, come what may.

The human journey on its own is not always easy. As the Lord's human journey intertwined with His divine, so must our human journey intertwine with His journey. As the Lord Jesus completed His mission through the human journey, His Father in heaven accomplished the Divine purpose for the Kingdom. May we be faithful to live in obedience to Him in our human journey so that His Divine purposes may be accomplished in and through us.

Over To You

What has your journey been like in following the Master? How much of your own story reflect your wanting of your own will? How much does your human earthly journey reflect the journey of the Lord Jesus Christ – yet not my will, but Yours be done?

Prayer

Lord, teach me to pray according to Your will. But when my heart is drawn towards somewhere else, teach me to pray – yet not my will, but Yours be done.

Further Lent Reading: Psalm 86:1-11, Isaiah 58:9b-14, Luke 5:27-32



THE DENIALIST

Meditation Text: "Whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 10: 33)

I once attended to a patient who was admitted with a heart attack. It was his second heart attack within a year. He was only 45 years old and confessed that he smoked like chimney (up to 40 cigs a day even AFTER his first heart attack!).

When I candidly advised him to consider quitting the habit, he became defensive. These were some his remarks to me:

"Doctor, let me tell you ah, smoking is not the issue here. People get heart attack because of all the fatty stuff they eat and it clogs up their vessels"

"My brother who doesn't smoke at all, already had 3 heart attacks and he just went for a bypass surgery"

"(Tun) Mahathir also had to undergo 2 bypasses and he doesn't smoke"

"You see, people who don't smoke also get lung cancer what. How can they say smoking causes lung cancer"

"Smoking is not dangerous at all; it is all the other stuffs that make a person unhealthy"

I reminded him that his brother, whilst not a smoker, had his first heart attack at the age of 56 while he has had 2 heart attacks and he is only 45!

I also reminded him that (Tun Dr.) Mahathir is almost twice his age.

I agree that people who do not smoke also die of heart attacks or lung cancer. I tried telling him that smoking is a major risk factor for these two conditions but he cut me off mid-sentence and would not listen.

He got me thinking. Am I in denial as well? Those little secret sins that I take pleasure in are slowly but surely eating away at my spiritual life. Wouldn't my acceptance of these 'pleasures' be a form of denying the lordship of Christ over my life as well?

The patient and I are no different from each other.

Over To You

In what ways are you denying the Lord Jesus Christ over your life? Journal your response as a prayer.



WATCHFULNESS

*A brother who was living among other brothers asked Abba Bessarion: What should I do?
The old man replied: Be silent, and do not measure yourself against the others.*

It's tempting to compare ourselves with other people.

We look around and ask: Why is she more popular than me? How come people are attracted to his ideas, not mine? Why do I struggle and fail while other people find it so easy to _____ (e.g. make friends, marry a perfect spouse, raise smart kids, get promoted)?

Comparing ourselves with people can lead us down a slippery slope: we see what people have or don't have; we wish for what we do not have or gloat at what they do not have; eventually we fall into envy, greed, self-hatred or pride.

Even though the desert saints had stripped themselves of property, professions and possessions, they still struggled with the tendency to measure themselves against others. Some would outdo one another in holy deeds, striving to pray longer hours, fast more days and memorize more books of Scripture.

Abba Bessarion, in his wisdom, recognized that the process of falling into sin often begins when we measure ourselves against others.

Such compulsive behavior eventually feeds our lust and makes us proud of our possessions and abilities (1 John 2:16).

Today's Response

Ask the Lord to help you recollect past moments when you compared yourself with other people. Did any of these tendencies cause you to sin? Write down your insights in a journal, surrender your struggles to God, or share them with a trusted friend.

Spiritual Discipline

Watchfulness. Notice the kinds of people, places and things that cause you to measure yourself against others. When do you tend to compare? Do you observe any conditioned patterns? Ask Jesus to help you 'silence' these thoughts, and give thanks for the abilities of other people.



PRIORITIES

Meditation Text: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be given to you as well." (Matthew 6: 28-34)

*O Lord, let me not henceforth desire health or life,
Except to spend them for Thee, with Thee and in Thee.*

Thou alone knows what is good for me;

Do, therefore, what seems Thee best.

Give to me or take from me;

Conform my will to Thine;

And grant that, with humble and perfect submission, and in holy confidence,

I may receive the orders of Thine eternal Providence,

And may equally adore all that comes to me from Thee,

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

- Blaise Pascal -

Blaise Pascal, a child prodigy, mathematician, philosopher prayed not so much for health and life but to live his life in gratitude of God's goodness. He knew he could surrender his life to His God. To Pascal, this God alone, knew what was best for him, and hence he could confidently commit his life to His maker, in submission to His good will and pleasure.

When explored in-depth the desires of our hearts, we often find them inadvertently, centred around our own wants, needs and interest. This prayer speaks about desiring a life that is centered on God, not a life to please ourselves.

Over To You

Take time to pray this prayer. Become aware of your response to this prayer.....your aversions and hopes. Journal these inner dialogues.



PARADOX OF THE HEART

Meditation Text: Mark 14:43-46

Second Station: Jesus is betrayed by Judas and arrested

'The man I shall kiss is the one; arrest him and lead him away securely.' These were the words of Judas.

One cannot imagine a more painful deceit - camouflaging death by affection. Surely no scheme is more perverted than a greeting that was offered to a friend and a Master that was soon followed by the sword. Jesus and Judas were no strangers to one another. Judas was one of Jesus' disciples. Here was a man who spent three years following the Lord Jesus Christ, ate with Him, slept with Him and walked with Him. Here was the man who Christ had taught, loved, lived and ministered with.

Yet it appears that somewhere in that process, something drastically colored the conversion. Some scholars doubted Judas and questioned if his conversion was ever true. This is something we cannot know. And if he was truly converted, perhaps he fell into the very temptation that Jesus warned His disciples against – that no one can serve two masters. Judas' choice clearly led him to an act of a deathly kiss – a kiss that betrays. Could there be a more perverted defiance of the heart? This was a defiance that cost him his own soul.

'The heart is more deceitful than all else; And is desperately sick; Who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart. I test the mind. Even to give to each man according to his ways. according to the results of his deed.' (Jer 17:9-10)

One cannot be too quick to know completely the depth of our hearts. Only the Lord searches the heart of men. May we allow Him that privilege and space.

Over To You

Allow the Lord's illuminating light to search your heart this day. This must be our prayer every day. How aware are you of the paradoxes, dilemmas and conflicts of your own heart? How aware and what are the temptations of your heart that often would draw you away from you making your Lord, the Lord of your life?

Prayer

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.
(Psalm 139:23-24)



SUDDEN DEATH

Meditation Text: "You fool! This night your soul will be required of you..." (Luke 12: 20)

His last words to me were "Doctor, I...". Then he fell forward and gasped, clutching a hand to his chest and suddenly went limp. I blurted out, "Sh*t!!!" and caught him just before he fell off the bed. He wasn't responsive by then, his breathing was shallow and his body was drenched in sweat.

From then on, things were a blur. I remember shouting for the resuscitation trolley, gloving up, commencing CPR with a team of doctors. I remember inserting the endotracheal tube into his lifeless airway. The cardiac monitor showed VF-VT pattern. We shocked him a couple of times to no avail. We got him back a while only to lose him again. We went on and on and on... we tried everything.

And then, it was over.

I hardly knew him beyond the fact that he was a young man who was admitted for chest pain which started that morning while he was driving his taxi. A woman brought him to the hospital. She was reserved when asked about their relationship but I managed to find out that he had a heart attack a while ago and even had an angiogram done. I knew that he continued to smoke after the heart attack. I was interviewing him when he collapsed.

There was no one there to grieve his passing. I learnt that he was estranged from his family. The woman with him

expressed shock and disbelief. Arrangements were made to have the body sent to the morgue.

I went home late that day, tired and hungry with a migraine headache pounding. I had dinner, took a shower, pop some pills for the headache and rested. I didn't go over my kid's school work with her that night. I didn't feel up to it.

In the back of my mind, the incident earlier in the day was replayed over and over again. It was too sudden. I wonder if we could have saved his life if he came earlier, if we acted a little faster, if we have intervention cardiology facilities available, if he didn't smoked anymore...

But the truth is, even with all the medical facilities available, we might still not be able to save him. Looking at things from a somewhat morbid angle, the moment he fell forward was the moment 'his soul was required of him'.

There were times I thought about death and dying but in the end, I think what's more important is the 'lived and living' before that.

Over To You

Are you ready if this night your soul is required of you? Take some time to examine your 'lived and living'. Journal your response as a prayer.



SURRENDER

Abba Nilus said: Do not want things to turn out as they seem best to you, but as God pleases. Then you will be free of confusion and thankful in your prayer.

Are you at a crossroads in life?

A crossroad may involve a job transition, grief, failure, deeper awareness of sin, spiritual dryness or a situation that worries you (e.g. global economic crisis, financial instability).

In such times, we are given renewed opportunities to trust in God. “We must yield to God when he urges us to let him reign with us,” says spiritual director Francois Fenelon.

Abba Nilus tells us that we have nothing to fear in allowing God to do with our lives as he pleases. The key thing is to trust. Our act of trusting God is like a key that opens the door that leads us deeper into the Kingdom of God.

Today’s Response

Write down all your plans (career, family, Christian ministry, holidays, etc). Then listen to the words of Francois Fenelon: “Let go of your plans. God will do as he pleases with them.

Even if they were to succeed through earthly means, he would not bless them.

But if you offer them unreservedly to him, he will turn everything to his own merciful purposes, whether he does what you wish or not.” Surrender to God all your best-laid plans.

Spiritual Discipline

Surrendering to God. Pray the same prayer Jesus prayed to the Father: “Not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Allow Jesus’ words to accompany you as you work, travel, rest, etc. Do not fret if you forget to pray. Start anew the next day. If you sense God’s firm and gentle guidance, be ready to obey.



AMBITIONS AND HOPES

Meditation Text: "The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men, To see if there are any who understand, any who seek God." (Psalm 14:2)

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it Lord, that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ, my God
All the vain things that charm me most
I sacrifice them to His blood.*

*See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

- Blaise Pascal -

This hymn by Isaac Watts, is considered one of the greatest hymns in the English Language. Isaac was frail in health during much of his life. For the last thirty years of his life, he was more or less an invalid. Watt's ambition, according to his own words, was as follows: "My design was not to exalt myself to the rank and glory of poets, but I was ambitious to be a servant to the churches and a helper to the joy of the meanest Christian."

The reality of God's amazing love for us demands a response. What are the most sacred and compelling hopes and purposes in your life?

Prayer

O Lord, in the simplicity of my heart, I offer myself to you today, To be your servant forever, to obey you and to be a sacrifice of perpetual praise. Amen

- Thomas a Kempis -

Further Lent Reading: Daniel 9:3-10, Psalm 79:1-9, Luke 6:27-38



FURTHER ROOM

Meditation Text: Luke 22:66-71

Third Station: Jesus is Condemned by the Sanhedrin

Don Miller in his book, *Blue Like Jazz* described himself as not liking jazz because it feels unresolved for him. Jazz is a strange kind of music for beginners who are trained in plain old classical harmonized hymns yet they are as rhythmic and harmonized as they could be for any jazz lovers. I too, used to hate jazz because I could not understand the music. Yet in an unplanned period in my life, I fell in love with jazz simply because it is unresolved. It was merely the unresolved in my heart that resonated with the unresolved texture of the music. And this resonance was healing for the soul – feeling resolved with the unresolved is something that only God can orchestrate in anyone's heart.

There in lies the questions of the soul. Who am I? Where am I going? Who do I belong to? And often our quest in life often end with one frequently asked question – Who are you, God?

Jesus' reply to the Sanhedrin often reflected His response to us. We desire to know who He is and to know Him. Yet, sadly, when He does reveal Himself, we do not always choose to believe who He tells us He is. Often we do not even recognize Him.

The Sanhedrin's disbelief of Jesus, despite Jesus' response led to them having no further room in their hearts to want to know Him for themselves. For their response of 'what further need do we have of testimony?' had locked them forever in disbelief.

In all unresolved questions of our minds and hearts, may we have space in our hearts so that when He choose to respond to us further, we are ready to hear Him and believe Him.

Over To You

Consider asking the Lord 'Are you the Son of God?' Are you the Christ?'

Listen in silence and wait for a response from Him.

Prayer

Lord, may we empty ourselves daily in order to create new space in our hearts so that we can give you further room.



MAKING PEACE

Meditation Text: "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come, and the years draw near..." (Ecclesiastes 12: 1)

"Doc, it's time. I don't want to fight anymore. I am tired. I have suffered enough. I am ready. I have made peace with everyone and myself. I want to give up already."

Those were the words of a young man as he suddenly clutched my hand when I looked in on him during the morning round in the hospital. I looked at him and said what I had to say,

"Don't give up okay, we are fighting this with you and we are not giving up on you".

But he did.

He became more breathless by mid-afternoon.

By that evening we had to put him on a machine to help him breathe. The fulminant infection in his lungs was slowly sucking the life out of his body which was already weakened by HIV.

He lingered on in a semi-comatose state for another 6 days. He would move his fingers when he sensed some one was near. He would grasp my hand when I touched his. A Bible lay beside his pillow. Someone must have placed it there.

He breathed his last on a Sunday morning, right about the time my family and I were singing songs of praise to the our Maker in church.

I'd like to think that he lived a full life. He once told me that he had no regrets. I only hope and pray that he has also made peace with his Creator.

Over To You

Who would you say your Creator is? How would you remember Him? What would you like to say to Him today? Journal your thoughts as a prayer.



SURRENDER

Amma Theodora said:

A teacher ought to be a stranger to love of domination, and a foreigner to vainglory, far from arrogance, neither deceived by flattery, nor blinded by gifts, nor a slave to the stomach, nor held back by anger, but rather should be patient, kind, and as far as possible humble. He ought to be self-disciplined, tolerant, diligent, and a lover of souls.

What does a matured Christian look like?

One response would be to look at the Christian activities he or she is involved in e.g. attends prayer meetings, leads a cell group, preaches, serves as a deacon and organizes mission trips. Such an assessment is superficial, though. We have undoubtedly met Christians (including ourselves) who are serving actively in churches, and yet they refuse to work wholeheartedly in their day jobs. Or they linger in relationships that kill their spirits. Or they harbor sick secrets. Or their actions do not match their words. This is not matured Christian behavior.

God primarily looks at who we are (not what we do). He “looks at the heart” or the inner life (1 Sam. 16:7, Luke 16:15). In the same way, Amma Theodora’s list of highly valued attributes point to our inner disposition (rather than external actions).

We do not strive for these attributes – we would surely fail. The secret lies in drawing near to Jesus; it is he who grants us the strength to become “self-disciplined, tolerant, diligent, and a lover of souls.”

Today’s Response

Review Amma Theodora’s character list. What are your spiritual blind spots? What is one attribute you desire to cultivate?

Spiritual Discipline

In the coming weeks, skim through the gospels to see how Jesus embodies that attribute which you desire. Be responsive to the Spirit’s firm but gentle guidance in transforming your inner disposition



CONFESSION

Meditation Text: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment." - Matthew 22: 36-38

"I do not love God.

If I loved Him, I would be thinking of Him with heartfelt satisfaction; thoughts of God would fill me with joy and delight. Instead, I think more and with greater eagerness about worldly things, while thoughts of God present difficulty and aridity. I do not find delight in prayer, I find it difficult to pray.

When I am thinking about God, when I place myself in His presence, every hour seems like a year. In the course of the day I barely take one hour to immerse myself deeply in meditation about God and enkindle within myself love for Him, but for twenty three hours with eagerness I bring fervent sacrifices to the idols of my passions."

An extract - Confessions of a pilgrim

I have avid curiosity about secular news and political events; I seek satisfaction for my love of knowledge in worldly studies and methods of acquiring possessions. But the study of the law of the Lord, knowledge of God, and religion does not impress me, does not nourish my soul.

Over To You

How is your relationship with God honoured and given quality time?
Does your heart resonate with this confession?

Speak with the Lord concerning the state of your soul.

Prayer

*Thank you Lord Jesus Christ,
For all the benefits
which you have given me,
For all the pain and insults
you have borne for me.
O most merciful redeemer,
friend and brother,
May I know you more clearly,
Love you more dearly
And follow you more nearly,
Day by day.*

- Richard of Chichester -



I DO NOT KNOW HIM

Meditation Text: Matt 26:69-75

Forth Station: Jesus is Denied by Peter

*“You too were with Jesus the Galilean...” (“I do not know what you are talking about!”)
“This man was with Jesus of Nazorean...” (“I do not know the man!”)
“Surely you too are one of them; even your speech gives you away...” (“I do not know the man!”)*

When you spend long enough time with someone who you consider as your beloved Master and Teacher, it does not take very long before people associate you with your Master. It is also no wonder how you may resemble him in your speech and thought(s) and actions. You may have internalized the things you learnt from him and made them yours. That would be the fruitfulness of any Master-Teacher relationship. That would be the goal and heart of any good teacher and the desire of any ardent pupil.

But in this scene of Peter, it was not a welcomed association. It was a scene of vehement objection and insistence. The insistence must have come from clarity on the part of the crowd who must have seen Peter with Christ on countless occasions. Peter then was not hiding his associations from the public. Peter had no reasons to hide – then.

Overnight, things changed. He hid. He ran away. He denied ever knowing Christ. And in case we are too quick to judge, may we be reminded that we

are not exempted from this same test.

Over To You

Place yourself in the scene. If you were in Peter’s shoes, your Master has been taken away and you were told of your associations with Christ, what would your own personal responses be?

How different would your responses be from Peter’s? How similar would your own responses be with Peter’s?

Have you denied Him in your choices? Have you chosen to do something else although you knew in your heart that the only right thing to do is to follow Him? What are you most fearful to lose in your following of Him?

Prayer

Lord, help me to follow you all the way.

Lord, help me to know the truth of my own heart.

Lord, forgive me because my heart does not always choose you.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.



A NEW HEART

*Meditation Text: "Cast away from you all the transgressions
which you have committed, and get yourselves
a new heart and a new spirit; ..."
"For I have no pleasure in the death
of one who dies," says the Lord GOD.
"Therefore turn and live!" (Ezekiel 18: 31-32)*

Another one passes on.

I held his cold lifeless hand as the light
slowly went out from his eyes.

It was quick and merciful I suppose.
Another life has passed on to the other
side. I felt a great loss and grief though
I barely knew him.

Here I am, one who claim to know
the Maker holding on to another who
does not, passing on and I couldn't (or
didn't) do anything.

HIV claimed him. There wasn't a single
loved one around him when he died.
No one would be grieving his death.

That's really sad.

He didn't suffer much as his pneumo-
nia ridden lungs and a weakened heart
could not have sustained any life much
longer anyway.

He didn't get 'a new heart and a new
spirit', maybe he didn't know he
could....

Over To You

Have you received a new heart and a
new spirit? Consider people in your
lives who have yet to. Journal your re-
sponse as a prayer.



SOLITUDE

*In Scetis, a brother went to see Abba Moses
and begged him for a word. And the old man said:
Remain in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.*

Most Christians agree that prayer is vital to the spiritual life. The prophet Daniel modeled this by praying three times a day while he worked. Jesus prayed alone and with people. The apostle Paul prayed while writing letters, traveling or meeting people. The Bible shows us that our deepest longing is to remain in God's presence (Ps. 84:10).

And yet, so often, we neglect the very thing that gives us life. We allow ourselves to be distracted by the pressures of work, household chores, daily tasks, and sometimes, even the pressing duties of church activities. Before we know it, another day has gone, and our spiritual life feels as shriveled as ever before.

In Scetis, a young brother was struggling with this same issue: how do you grow in the spiritual life? So he begged for advice from the great Abba Moses. The old man said only one thing: remain. Abba Moses' wise words echo Jesus' words to us: "you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me" (John 15:4).

How do we remain in Jesus?

One way would be to imitate Jesus in ruthlessly carving out time for solitude. In his three years of teaching, healing and encountering needy people, Jesus found it essential to withdraw from people in order to remain with the Father (Mark 1:32-36).

We should do no less. "*Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life,*" says Henri Nouwen.

Today's Response

Reflect on the relationship between private prayer and active ministry. Are you convinced that private prayer is essential for doing God's work? Ask God to rekindle your desire to remain with Jesus.

Spiritual Discipline

Develop small but creative ways to incorporate silence or solitude into your day/week/month. Invite a friend to regularly ask you this question: "*In what ways are you giving God your undivided attention?*"



TRUTH AND FAITHFULNESS

The Collect (Prayer)

*Almighty and everlasting God, which hatest nothing that thou hast made,
 And dost forgive the sins of all them that be penitent;
 Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we worthily lamenting our sins and
 acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee,
 The God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness;
 Through Jesus Christ.*

- Thomas Cranmer -

Background

Thomas Cranmer was a bishop and is described as one with an astonishing blend of self-effacement and persistence in the service of faith. Cranmer was imprisoned, endured constant interrogation over thirty months before he was brought to the stake where he was burned. The theme of repentance runs through Cranmer's liturgy.

'A Collect' originated from the term, collecta, which refers to the gathering of the people together as well as to the "collecting up" of the petitions of the individual members of the congregation into one prayer.

Meditation

The key to hearing this prayer is its opening description of God, "which hatest nothing that thou has made." The prayer does not presume that human nature is able to achieve the good by natural effort.

This understanding of the sinful nature of man is essential for the rightly diagnosed human person. God forgives the sins of all them that be penitent. Penitence means seeing things as they are and flinging back that discouraging truth to God to take care of and dispose.

Can you take the very worst situation of your life, the lowest point to which you have ever seen yourself sink and still believe that God is reaching towards you? In extremes God is there. It is easy to say this in the abstract. But in the concrete hell of a personal box of canyon, it is a genuine tractor beam of fathomless light.

- The Collects of Thomas Cranmer, C.F. Barbee, P.F.M. Zahl. -



SILENCE AND SPEECH

Meditation Text: Mark 15:1-5, 15

Fifth Station: Jesus is Judged by Pontius Pilate

‘Jesus gave no further answer.’ During the time when he was accused and judged by Pontius Pilate. Jesus remained silent most part of the inquiry. He spoke when needed but mostly He was silent. In the case of Christ, silence and speech nurtured each other.

Bishop Robert Solomon in his ‘Feast for the Soul’ talked about God being silent because He had something to say. And we can only hear what he has to say if we join Him in His silence. When he speaks he is often heard in a gentle whisper (1 king 19:12). Silence enables us to face God and ourselves and come to terms with reality. Jesus’ moments of silence were deeply penetrating and prophetic. When he was unjustly accused and tried before His crucifixion, he remained silent. His silence showed a deep trust in His heavenly Father.

Read the passage of Jesus being interrogated again. Notice His silence and how penetrating that is. He chose not to speak to defend Himself.

We live in world of words, articulation, noise and self-advocacy. The more extroverted and self-confident we appear, the more acceptable we are to the world.

Yet the way of Christ seemed to counter the ways of the world.

Stand in the court with Jesus and witness the hearing. Listen to their accusations. Look at Jesus. Pay attention to His words and His silence.

What do you feel? What are you drawn towards?

Over To You

Is there something in your life during this Lent that you need to bring before the Lord and sit with Him in silence? Pay attention to what happens to you in the silence?

Is there something about your life that you feel the Lord seemed silent about? Will you sit with Him in silence and hear afresh the meaning of His loving response?

Prayer

Lord, may this Lent teach me that the sound of silence can penetrate the soul so that I will let you have Your way in me and know that You are with me even in silence.



A FATHER'S CRY

Meditation Text: "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" Matthew 27: 46

She was a sweet girl, only 16 years old but inflicted by the deadly disease known as Korstmann Syndrome. It is an inherited disorder where her bone marrow failed to produce mature neutrophils, a type of white blood cells, vital for immunity and fighting infections. Throughout her life, she has been in and out of hospital frequently due to one or another infection.

I remembered her as a sad girl and who could blame her? She was only happy when her family members were around, particularly her father. She was the apple of her father's eyes. She usually begs to go home even before her infection could be properly brought under control or cured. She always has an old pillow with her, the corners well worn by constant friction as she rubbed it constantly. I guess it's her 'security blanket'. We have often advised to discard the pillow as it may be a source of infection as the pillow cover was seldom washed. She wouldn't listen to us.

I was on call the day she passed away. Her body, ravaged by years of repeated infections, could no longer stave off another wave of deadly infections. This time, her body gave up, resulting in severe sepsis with disseminated intravascular coagulation. She bled from every orifice in her body. We spent 4 hours

trying to resuscitate her when she collapsed very early that fateful morning.

I shall never forget her father's sorrow and anguish when he was informed that his daughter was no more. He lifted her lifeless body, hugging it tight to his chest and cried, and he cried and he cried. Every one in the ward could hear his loud cries.

I can still remember his words so vividly: "Oh God! Oh God! Why? Why? Why does my daughter have to die? Why can't I die in her place instead? Oh God! Oh God!! Why, why, why?"

It was the cry from a father's heart. A cry of deep sorrow and great pain at the loss of some one so precious to him that if possible, he willingly take her place so that she might live.

The scene affected me profoundly that day. It's not too difficult now to comprehend how GOD, our Heavenly Father, saw us defenseless and sin-stricken, allowed Jesus to hang on a cross for us.

On the cross, Jesus cried out, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?"; went one step further and took our place.

Over To You

Sit with this truth of His love for you and journal your response to the Father.

Further Lent Reading: Hosea 14:1-9, Psalm 81:8-14, Mark 12:28-34



AS YOU WISH

*They asked Abba Macarius: 'How should we pray?'
The old man answered: 'A long speech is not necessary,
but instead stretch out your hands and say,
Lord, as you wish and as you know, have mercy.
Yet if you feel a conflict is breaking out, you have to say,
Lord, help! He knows what is good for us and treats us mercifully.'*

Lord, have mercy. Lord, help.

The desert saints teach us that that we can pray these simple words in any situation. In hard or sad times, or when we're weary or lonely, these words remind us God is near. In the Psalms, this prayer is uttered in the face of danger, fear, worry, grief and sleepless nights.

Feeling tempted or falling into sin? Lord, have mercy. In the midst of sin? Lord help. Pleading for forgiveness? Lord, have mercy.

We can pray these words when we wake up, while we work, and before we go to bed. Gradually our actions become living prayer because of our dependency on God. When things are going well, asking for God's mercy reminds us that God sustains us.

The prayer taught by Abba Macarius – “Lord, as you wish and as you know, have mercy” – captures the essence of Jesus' Prayer “Yet not what I will but what you will” (Mark 14:36).

Jesus shows us that our request for God's help is not an elixir for answered prayer or pain avoidance. Rather, we have the freedom to ask God whatever we want. And the Father has the freedom to answer our prayer in whatever way he wants. Ultimately, our prayers are answered, not when God does our will, but when we do his will (Mt. 6:10).

Today's Response

Pray Abba Macarius' prayer in all situations.

Spiritual Discipline

Pray this prayer for the coming hours, days, weeks and months.



THE SUFFERING GOD

Meditation Text: Hebrews 12:2-3

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God..

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lost heart.”

- O Jesus, poor and abject, unknown and despised,
have mercy upon me and let me not be ashamed to follow you.
- O Jesus, hated, calumniated* and persecuted
have mercy upon me and make me content to be as my master.
- O Jesus, blasphemed, accused and wrongfully condemned,
have mercy upon me and teach me to endure the contradiction
of sinners
- O Jesus, clothed with a habit of reproach and shame,
have mercy upon me and let me not seek my own glory
- O Jesus, insulted, mocked and spit upon
have mercy upon me and let me not faint in the fiery trial
- O Jesus, crowned with thorns and hailed in derision;
- O Jesus burdened with our sins and the curses of the people;
- O Jesus affronted, outraged, buffeted, overwhelmed with injuries, grief and
humiliations;
- O Jesus, hanging on the accursed tree, bowing the head,
Giving up the ghost,
have mercy upon me and conform my whole soul to your holy, humble
suffering Spirit.

- John Wesley -

The descriptions of Jesus in this prayer may seem alien to us. We live in a sensual, self-seeking society. We seek to feel good, abhorring pain and discipline. Jesus, the Son of God, chose to live among the ones God created, but who rejected and tortured Him. Have you seen this Jesus, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross bearing the shame.

Over To You

Take time to meditate on this prayer, paying attention to the descriptions of Jesus.

Allow the prayer to speak to you.

(*Calumniate – make false or malicious statements about)



THE LORD'S JOURNEY

Meditation Text: John 19:6, 15-17 'They took Jesus, therefore, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the Place of Skull...Golgotha.'

Sixth Station: Jesus Bears the Cross

In John Stott's 'The Cross of Christ', he described the crucifixion as having been invented by 'barbarians' on the edge of the known world and taken over from them by both the Greeks and Romans. It is probably the cruelest method of execution ever practiced, for it deliberately delayed death until maximum torture had been inflicted. The victim could suffer for days before dying. When the Romans adopted it, they reserved it for criminals convicted of murder, rebellion or armed robbery, provided that they were also slaves, foreigners or other non-persons.

Jesus began the journey to the place of execution by carrying his own cross. If we understand the background of the crucifixion, we would understand the extent of humiliation that Christ had to suffer and His journey through Via Dolorosa, the passage He took to Golgotha – the Place of Skull. He knew what was at the end. And He walked on.

Paul often challenged us in Romans and Colossians to die with Him, to suffer with Him, to be raised with Him and to be glorified with Him. Jesus' passage through Via Dolorosa pave our own passage of Via Dolorosa.

No one else is more qualified than the Lord Jesus himself who called us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him. He has shown the way. We are to follow Him.

Over To You

When the Lord Jesus Christ bore the cross, it symbolizes His bearing of our sins and death was the only way to redeem us. When He bore the cross, He emptied Himself so that He could be obedient to the point of death.

When the Lord Jesus Christ called you to deny yourself and take up your own cross, what does it mean for you?

Spend some time reflecting on the meaning of the Cross of Christ for you. What do you have to empty of yourself today?

Prayer

Lord, teach me to have the same attitude that You have so that I may know what it means to empty myself in order to walk humbly and obediently in following the journey You have paved for me.



A MOTHER'S LOVE

*Meditation Text: "For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son..."
(John 3:16)*

Twelve years ago, as a woman reached the last few weeks of her pregnancy with her first (and only) child, her husband lay dying in a hospital in another state. He eventually passed away and the woman was told he died of 'pneumonia'. She was widowed and she grieved.

The time came for her to deliver her first born. She delivered a baby born naturally. Her joy was short lived because she was then informed that she has HIV+. Subsequently the baby was diagnosed with HIV as well.

The son grew up, strong and 'healthy', never forgetting to take his medications. The time came for him to be schooled and his guardian angel must be watching over him for he was enrolled in a school where the headmaster knew about his condition and was sympathetic. The boy studied along with all his other HIV- class mates.

The only condition was that he refrain from participating in any sports activity, a limitation which the boy did not like, for he yearned to run and play all the games that his school mates play. Still, he obeyed the rule and only plays at home, by himself. "He is a good boy", his mother told me when I saw her in my clinic a while ago.

"He is good in his studies and is healthy", she added.

"I'm okay", she replied when enquired about her well being.

The first of many tear drops welled in her eyes as she related her tragic story to me.

Tear drops became little rivulets running down her cheeks.

"You know, doctor, there were many times I wanted to end it all. I thought of taking my own life. You know what held me back? You know what gives me the will to live?"

"It's my son. I have to live and survive for him."

"Because he has no one else..."

She probably knew it deep within her heart. She was, in actual fact, prolonging death so that her son might live.

Our Father-in-Heaven looked down upon earth and saw our sin infected state and He grieved. So He sent Jesus, willing Him to die, so that we might live.

He saw that we have no one else.

Over To You

Consider this Truth that no one else could save you. No one, except the Lord Jesus Christ. How real is this truth for you? Journal your thoughts as your prayer response



SINGLE HEAD

A brother asked an old man: What shall I do?

For many thoughts are bothering me, and I don't know how to fight back.

The old man said: Do not fight against all of them, but against one.

In fact, all thoughts of monks have a single head. Therefore, you have to figure out which and what kind it is, and fight against it.

By doing so, you can defeat the rest of those thoughts.

Despite our sincere attempts to fight sin, we often fall back into the same patterns of rage, lust, cynicism, incessant worry, etc.

In their wisdom, the desert saints recognized that fighting against sin is not straightforward. Each person has a different personality, family system and cultural upbringing. So we need discernment in diagnosing and treating the deep roots of sin.

For example, a person's struggles with lust, pride and workaholism could be rooted in a single 'head' or source: loneliness. Therefore true healing begins only when that person realizes that God is attentive to him – and that he is never truly alone.

We need friends, mentors and Christian community to help us discern the "single head" of sinful thoughts. Most of all, we need an utter dependence and trust in Jesus Christ who has vanquished our sin.

Today's Response

We are called "watch and pray" with Jesus so we do not fall into temptation. Read Matthew 26:41 and imagine yourself keeping company with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Spend 15 minutes in silence before God.

Spiritual Discipline

Revelation of thoughts. Ask God to help you identify a wise and understanding person who will meet with you regularly. Reveal your ongoing struggles to that person, and ask him or her to discern with you the 'single head' of your thoughts, and to pray with you.



EMBRACE THE CROSS

*Embrace the Cross Where Jesus Suffered,
Though it will cost all you claim as yours.
Your sacrifice will seem small beside the treasure,
Eternity can't measure what Jesus holds in store*

*Embrace the love, the cross requires,
Cling to the One whose heart knew every pain.
Receive from Jesus fountains of compassion
Only He can fashion your heart to move as His.*

*Embrace the Life that comes from dying,
Come trace the steps the Saviour walked for you.
An empty tomb, concludes Golgotha's sorrow.
Endure then till tomorrow, your cross of suffering*

Embrace the Cross

- J G Elliot -

Meditation

I have an aversion for instruments of torture; they scare me. The cross was such an instrument of torture; it was reserved for criminals. Jesus' death on the cross was gruesome, shameful and excruciating. The cross in Jesus time was not an accessory, not something we wore for adornment. Why did Jesus embrace the cross?

Jesus calls you and I to take up our cross daily and to follow Him.

The cross ... reveals God's love, His compassion, His forgiveness, and His plans and purposes of God's rule/Kingdom.

Prayer

May our dear Lord Jesus Christ show you his hands and his side, and with his love, put joy into your hearts. May you behold and hear only Him until you find your joy in Him.

- Martin Luther -



RECOGNISE THE SAVIOUR

Meditation Text: Luke 23:39-43

Seventh Station: Jesus Promises His Kingdom to the Good Thief

Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us." The other, however, rebuking Him, said in reply, "Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into the kingdom," He replied to him, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:39-43)

Imagine the Scene

Place yourself in the scene of this narrative. Consider the place, the people, the aroma, the setting, the different roles and imagine what your personal responses would be like.

As a bystander. . . .

You watched. You heard the conversation between Jesus and the two thieves. What is your response?

As the thief who reviled and cursed Jesus. . . .

Now place yourself in the scene and choose to be the thief who reviled Jesus. How do you feel? What is running across your mind? What do you wish to say to Jesus?

As the good thief. . .

Now place yourself in the shoe of the Good Thief. You have a conversation with the Lord. You desire and long to

be remembered by Him.

Pay attention to your longings in the presence of the One who is standing next to you. What would you say to Him? What do you most desire to say to the Lord Jesus Christ?

After a few moments, He then speaks. What do you hear?

Is it possible that the statements of both criminals to Christ arose from the same longings. Both truly desired salvation of their souls. The difference was that one knew and recognized the Saviour while the other did not, although He was just an arm's length from him.

Over To You

What was the experience like for you? Which role did you find yourself more inclined towards? Which role was hardest for you? How much of your journey reflect the bystander? Is it remotely possible that perhaps you have been like the thief who cursed Jesus in your dire need to understand life? Consider your life in light of the request of the good thief. How similar or different have your own journey been like? Journal.

Prayer

Lord, enlighten the eyes of my heart so that when you are before my very eyes, my heart leaps in recognition of you and know that you are indeed my Saviour and that you can offer me salvation!

Further Lent Reading: Jer 11:18-20, Psalm 7:6-11, John 7:37-52



FASTING

*Meditation Text: "Is this not the fast that I have chosen:
to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens,
to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out;
when you see the naked, that you cover him,
and not hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isaiah 58: 6-7)*

I can't fast.

And Christians are expected to fast; at least, good and devout Christians are, anyway; especially during Lent! By the same logic, that would make me a bad Christian.

I've tried fasting before and I usually end up with a huge migraine attack which would render me quite unproductive.

One day I realized that going hungry is a trigger for migraine attack!

So does consuming foodstuff like chocolate, cheese, nuts, hotdogs, burgers, canned food, soft drinks, preserved stuff, sleep deprivation, loud noises, stuffy or crampy surrounding bright lights and heat.

One could be forgiven to think I lead a pretty deprived life, at least in terms of food.

While God is pleased with those who practice the discipline of fasting, I'd like to believe that He is equally pleased with another kind of fast as written in Isaiah 58: 6 -7. Acts done to bring relief to another fellow human being are equally pleasing to God as is the physical act of depriving oneself of sustenance in order to draw nearer to Him.

This kind of fast has its rewards to, for the next 2 verses say: "Then, your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am'. Isaiah 58: 8-9

Care to join me in fasting?

Over To You

Journal your thoughts as your response to the Lord in prayer.



DRIBBLING SAND

*Meditation Text: Once a brother committed a sin in Scetis,
and the elders assembled and sent for Abba Moses.*

He, however, did not want to go. Then the priest sent a message to him, saying:

Come, everybody is waiting for you. So he finally got up to go.

And he took a worn-out basket with holes,

filled it with sand, and carried it along.

The people who came to meet him said: What is this, Father?

Then the old man said: My sins are running out behind me, yet I do not see them.

And today I have come to judge the sins of someone else.

*When they heard this, they said nothing to the brother,
and pardoned him.*

In his past life, Abba Moses was a highway robber who stripped travelers of their possessions and left them to die. Eventually, in deep remorse, he joined a monastery, where he endured endless mockery from monks because of his dark skin.

In God's grace, Abba Moses' painful past made him deeply aware of the plight of sinners. In carrying a basket of dribbling sand, Moses brought forgiveness to the brother who committed an unnamed crime. Like Jesus who wrote on sand (John 8:1-11), Abba Moses also silenced the accusers and brought them to their senses.

Abba Moses saw himself as a sinner. So he treated sinners and accusers alike with compassion and gentleness. In refusing to rush toward judgment, Moses was taking to heart Jesus' words, "he that is without sin among you let him cast the first stone" (John 8:7).

Today's Response

God used Abba Moses' failings and trials as a means of blessing others. As you reflect on your past failings, in what ways is God shaping you to become a gentle and loving person?

Spiritual Discipline

Watchfulness. Become watchful of situations that cause you to be judgmental. Ask Jesus to help you walk in the other person's shoes, and to respond with love and compassion.



LOVE MY NEIGHBOUR

*Meditation Text: "The entire law is summed up in a single command:
"love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5:14)*

An extract of the confessions of a sojourner:

"I do not love my neighbor.

Not only because I am not ready to lay down my life for the good of my neighbor, according to the Gospel, but I will not even sacrifice my peace and my happiness for his good. If I loved my neighbour as myself, as the Gospel commands, then his misfortune would grieve me also and his prosperity would bring me great joy. But on the contrary, I listen with curiosity to accounts of my neighbour's misfortune and I am not grieved but indifferent to them and I seem to find satisfaction in them. I do not sympathize with the failings of my brother but I judge them and publicize them."

Meditation

The entire law can be summed up in one command. This is God's emphasis – it is in the way we treat our neighbour. Love is about honouring one another, caring for one another, upholding righteousness and justice for one another. Let us not mistake love for being sentimental. His emphasis is not on how effective your ministry is or how much you have accomplished, or your talents and contributions.

It is this.... Love your neighbor as yourself. The Almighty God is ultimately concerned about whether you love others. His laws reveal His heart.

How do you treat your neighbor? Do you look out for them? Do you bless them?

Prayer

*Grant, we beseech Thee, Merciful Father,
That we may never presume on our own
might and power;
But acknowledging our own infirmity, frailty
and weakness
May receive at Thy mighty hand strength to
perform Thy holy and
Blessed will. Hear us O Lord Jesus, for Thy
name's sake*

- Thomas Cranmer -



BEHOLD YOUR MOTHER

Meditation Text: Standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary of Magdala. When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple there whom he loved, 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 into his home. (John 19:25-27)

Eighth Station : Jesus Speaks to His Mother and the Beloved Disciples

This was Jesus' final hour. He is with His closest circle. Mary, His mother who was chosen because God the Father saw the yielded heart of one who said, 'Be it Unto Me According to Your Word.' She was the same woman who brought him to the temple when Jesus was twelve and when He returned after a few days, told Mary, His mother, 'Do you not know that I am doing my Father's business.' At the scene of the cross, Mary continued to be with Jesus at the pinnacle point of His mission on earth – His death on the Cross.

Words alone may not be able to contain the depth of pain and sorrow of any mother who has to witness the torture, dying and death of her son. Scripture depicts Mary as a woman who often pondered things in her heart and walked in complete obedience to the Father. And at the end of her mission, the Lord Jesus Christ remembered her and entrusted her to be cared for by John, the disciple whom Jesus loved.

One cannot meditate on this scene and not be touched at the core of our souls by the love of the Son of Man for His

earthly mother as well as the Son of God who knew His final destiny. The Lord Jesus Christ paused in the middle of this Grand Narrative – so someone whom He loved and had loved him on earth would be taken care of when He returns to His Father. He attended to a crucial human need before accomplishing the Grand Divine purpose.

Over To You

Meditate on this. Place yourself in the character of Mary, the mother of Jesus. What has the journey been like for you? At the cross, nearing the death of Jesus, He entrusted you to his disciple, John. What do you think Jesus feels about you?

Continue this meditation. This time imagine you are John and is told about taking care of Jesus' mother, Mary. How do you feel about this responsibility?

Prayer

Lord, teach me to notice that nothing should ever be too divine that our human souls cannot comprehend or respond to practically. Teach me to love the way You loved. Teach me to love all the way.



PAINFUL EXIT

Meditation Text: "I am the resurrection and the life.

He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live."(John 11.25)

Once, I had a patient who was an elderly man who was diagnosed with lung cancer. After receiving 2 courses of chemotherapy he felt much better and decided to discontinue chemotherapy and instead tried traditional herbal therapies.

By the time he presented again to the hospital, the tumor has spread to his brain and abdomen. Still believing he is okay, he once again declined chemotherapy.

Not too long after that, he became increasingly breathless and his X-ray showed a huge tumor mass compressing almost his entire right lung! This time he asked for chemotherapy.

But by then it was far too late.

I got to know that he was divorced. He had an only son, in his late teens who was by his bedside all the time. His wife has moved to Australia and according to his son "she couldn't care less". He had a sister in USA who could not make it back to see him.

It was hard for me when I took his teenage son aside and told him that his father was dying.

It was hard for me to look at the patient in the eye and tell him we are doing the best we can. Did he see the helplessness in my eyes? Did he know that his situation was hopeless?

Once again I am reminded that human life is finite. Life is short. It's a terrible way to go. It reminds me again that in my short life, I want to try and make the most of it; to leave this place a little better, or make someone's life a little easier. It reminds me also of God's sovereignty. In the end He has the final say.

However, I am also reminded that, just as Gandalf whispered, with a little twinkle in his eye, to little Pippin (or was it the other hobbit?) just before the assault by the dark forces on the stronghold, in Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers (or was it the third part? I forgot), death is but the door way to something better.

And that is strangely comforting.

Over To You

Consider your mortality. Consider your life without God in eternity. Then consider life with God in eternity. Journal your thoughts in prayer.



DRIBBLING SAND

*Meditation Text: As he was dying, Abba Benjamin taught his sons this:
Do this and you'll be saved: Rejoice always, pray constantly,
and in all circumstances give thanks.*

To experience life, we must embrace death. Everyday.

This paradox lies at the heart of Christian life. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me," says Jesus. "For whoever...loses their life for me will save it" (Luke 9:23-24).

What does it mean to die daily?

It entails following Jesus on the journey toward the cross. Just as Jesus embraced many small deaths toward his crucifixion, we are also in the process of dying. One day, all the things precious to us will be stripped away: our youth, beauty, career, ministry, relationships, belongings, vital health and life itself.

With this realization, Abba Benjamin challenges us to accept all the daily blessings and crosses as a gift from God. There will be times when we do not wish to pray or be thankful. No matter: Jesus shares in our sorrow, confusion or pain. We are not alone.

As we learn to die daily, Jesus also shares with us his resurrection joy. God has given us life, family, friends, education, giftedness, strength, rest, hope and love. Our deepest source of gratitude comes from realizing that God has given us himself – the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today's Response

Write down 10 specific things you wish to thank God for today (e.g. work, loved ones, home, lunch, etc).

Spiritual Discipline

Thanksgiving. On a daily basis, identify 10 things in life you're grateful for. Be creative. Along the way, learn also to thank God for the difficult stuff (stress, difficult boss or coworkers, financial stress, pain, sorrow). What is God teaching you as you learn to give thanks in all circumstances?



IT IS WELL WITH MY SOUL

Meditation Text: "The entire law is summed up in a single command: "love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5:14)

*When peace like a river, attendeth my way
When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

*Chorus: It is well with my soul,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

*Tho' Satan should buffet, tho' trials should come
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate
And hath shed His own blood for my soul*

*My Sin O the bliss of this glorious thought
My sin not in part, but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul.*

This hymn was written by Horatio G Spafford. Spafford had invested heavily in real estate which was wiped out by the Chicago Fire of 1871. In 1873, his four daughters died at sea. It is thought that on the sea near the area where the boat sank, he penned these words to express his sorrow. It is noteworthy that this hymn does not dwell on the theme of life's trials but focuses attention in the third stanza on the redemptive work of Christ.

Spafford understood grief and sorrow. He knew his God, and knew it would be well with his soul.

Over To You

Are you going through a period of grief and sorrow?

Speak with the Lord concerning your pain, Christ knows we need His grace.

Bring those you know who are going through a difficult them in prayer to the Lord, bringing them in love to the Father's presence.

Prayer

O God, Creator of mankind, I do not aspire to comprehend You or Your creation, nor to understand pain of suffering. I aspire only to relieve the pain of others, and I trust in doing so, I may understand more clearly Your nature, that You are the Father of all mankind, and that the hairs on my head are numbered.

Further Lent Reading: Psalm 36:5-10, Isaiah 42:1-9, Hebrews 11:39-12:3, John 12:1-11



GOING HOME

Meditation Text: Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" and when he had said this he breathed his last (Luke 23:44-46)

Ninth Station: Jesus Dies on the Cross

This was the final act of His obedience to the Father. He gave His life and returned to the Father.

A.M. Ramsey concluded that 'the death is the deepest point of the Son of God's identification of Himself with men and of His entry into the stream of human life. If He is near to men in the joyful contact of His ministry in Galilee, teaching, healing and blessing, He is nearer still as He goes to the Cross. Remote from all the superficialities of life and of society Christ enters by way of the Cross into nearer and nearer contact with the grim realities of sin and creatureliness and death. For death is not merely a physical fact...it has a moral meaning since it marks and declares the sinfulness and fragmentariness of mankind.'

It was for this hour and purpose that Christ came to walk with men on earth. It was for this precise moment that He had to suffer in the hands of men. It was for our sins that He died. We are the reason that He died. Yet in His dying, He commended His Spirit to His Father, from where He came from. His dying took Him home.

Over To You

Reenact the scene in your mind. You were standing all this night and were watching. Most of the crowd had deserted the place but you remained in this now quiet and lonely hill. You remembered all that the Lord Jesus has told you all these time while He was with you. You remembered how he told you about his impending death. You remembered how he talked to you about the betrayal and the denial. You remembered how you shrugged them off flippantly and sometimes did not always understand what he was referring to. Then you stood there and heard his last cry and breath. It was all suddenly coming to pass. It dawned on you that He was right all along.

Pay attention to what goes on in your heart and mind. How would you like to respond to Him? What does His death mean to you?

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you.
Lord Jesus Christ, thank you.
Lord Jesus Christ, thank you.



COLD AND FROZEN, FIRST AND LAST

*Meditation Text: "So the last will be first, and the first last.
For many are called, but few chosen." (Matthew 20: 16)*

I remember being drenched with rain water along with many other fellow campers many years ago. We were in Cameron Highlands attending one of the many camps organized by Scripture Union for young Christians and the rain caught us by surprise during one of the camp outings.

Now Cameron Highlands those days were a lot cooler than it is now and when one is drenched with rain, it was freezing cold!

As we stood shivering in a shelter out of the pouring rain, the leader quipped, "For many are cold but few are frozen!"

He was, of course, making a humorous reference to Matthew 22: 14 where Jesus said, "For many are called, but few chosen".

Jesus made many short, concise but powerful statements that contradicted the ways and values of the world. Another of such statement include "So the last shall be the first, and the first last." (Matt 20:16)

That statement was spoken at the end of a parable about a landowner who

went out to hire labourers to work his vineyard, for a sum of a denarius (about RM 70) per day. The landowner hired men at all times of the day, even up to the 'eleventh' hour. When it was time to collect their wages, those hired earlier in the day were upset that those who were hired later were paid the same amount as they were, one denarius. They had supposed that since they worked a full day, they ought to be paid more, conveniently forgetting that the agreed upon wage was indeed, one denarius.

In reply, the landowner stated that it was his prerogative to pay those who were hired later the same sum that he paid the earlier labourers.

Consider this. How many 'lent season' has it been since you agreed to come under God's 'employment'? Have you started 'work'? If you have, good, for your reward is great. If you have not, it is not too late. God is still looking out for 'eleventh hour' workers. Let us get working, for the reward is great.

Over To You

What has the Lord been inviting you to? How have you been responding to Him? Journal your response as a prayer.



SECRECY

Meditation Text: Saint Synclitica said: Just as a treasure exposed is quickly spent, so also a virtue that becomes famous or well publicized vanishes. Just as wax is quickly melted by fire, so the soul is emptied by praise, and loses firmness of virtue.

Whenever he could, Jesus avoided crowds.

Jesus preferred fulfilling his mission in small groups (the twelve disciples), personal conversations (the Samaritan woman and Nicodemus) and private prayer (with the Father). When the crowds wanted to make him king, Jesus fled the scene. He did not appear in Jerusalem after resurrection but spent hours walking and talking with an unnamed couple without ever disclosing his identity (Luke 24).

Why did Jesus favor the hidden life?

One reason is because Jesus, the perfect human being, understood the deceptiveness of the human heart. His forty days of desert temptation made him aware of the dangers of doing the right thing (exalting God) for the wrong reasons (gain human approval or personal gain).

We may claim that we have chosen to serve God without pandering to people's praises. But can we truly sort out one from the other? There is nothing wrong with receiving praise for work well done.

However, too much praise erodes our spiritual well-being, argues Amma Synclitica. We will become puffed up by compliments, or become despondent because of criticism. In contrast, a life that's hidden in Christ makes our spiritual walk steady.

Today's Response

Meditate on Colossians 3:3. "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." Ask Jesus to reveal to you what it means, for today, for you to be hidden with him.

Spiritual Discipline

Secrecy. With this exercise, you abstain from making your good deeds and acts of service known to people. You help your colleagues without other people knowing. You rejoice in the successes of others. You practice hidden acts of kindness (washing, sweeping, cleaning, arranging chairs etc) because God knows what we're doing.



HIS DWELLING PLACE

Meditation Text: How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty!

My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord;

My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

Even the sparrow has found a home,

And the swallow a nest for herself,

Where she may lay her young -

A place near your altar, O Lord Almighty, My King and my God,

Blessed are those who dwell in your house,

They are ever singing your praise.

Blessed are those whose strength is in you,

Who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.

As they pass through the valley of Baca

They make it a place of springs;

The autumn rains also cover it with pools.

They go from strength to strength;

Till each appears before God in Zion.

Psalm 84:1-7

Meditation

The psalmist expresses his longing for communion with God. Those who walk with Him are blessed. We wander looking for that rest and blessings in many ways and in many things. This psalm reminds us that our souls find rest in Christ alone. God invites you to find that rest and wholeness that only He can give. In the midst of living - work, ministry, family, responsibilities, grief, trials, invite Him to be your rock, your shield, your hope, your God.

As you prepare for Easter and the hope of the resurrection of Christ, what is your response to Him? Do you welcome Him? His presence? His love? His instructions? His dwelling place?

Prayer

Almighty God, Who art the Giver of all wisdom;

Enlighten our understanding with knowledge of right, and govern our wills by thy laws, that no deceit may mislead us, nor temptation corrupt us; that we may always endeavour to do good, and to hinder evil.

Amidst all the hopes and fears of this world, take not Thy Holy Spirit from us but grant that our thoughts may be fixed on Thee and that we may finally attain everlasting happiness, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen

- Book of congregational prayer, 1920



A HIDDEN PURPOSE

Meditation Text: Mark 15:40-47

Tenth Station: Jesus is Taken From the Cross

Upon the death of Jesus on the Cross, Joseph of Arimathea requested Pilate for the body of Jesus. Scriptures tells us a few things about Joseph. He is a rich and prominent member of the council. He was a disciple of Jesus although His discipleship was kept in secret for fear of the Jews. He was someone who was 'waiting for the Kingdom of God.' Yet, after the death of Jesus, He now openly and courageously asked for His body. He went to buy the linen and he prepared the body of Christ for burial.

This scene portrays only the act of preparation. One can only guess the possible turmoil and conflict of living a concealed life of discipleship. Perhaps that is why the act of Joseph of Arimathea was significant and was mentioned in all four of the Gospels. In the backdrop of the crucifixion of Christ by the leaders in Jerusalem, there was one leader amongst them that God must have set aside in quietness for such a time. Joseph had requested Pilate for the body, otherwise Jesus would have been buried together with the criminals. He did a complete preparation and anointing of the body according to Jewish custom and placed Jesus in a new tomb at a garden. He gave Jesus a proper burial. That was Joseph's revealed love for Christ.

One again can only imagine how sacred this role must have been for him – something God had chosen him to do.

Over To You

Place yourself in the scene of that evening. You have observed the entire crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ. You saw Him hung on the Cross and you heard Him breathed His last.

Where are you at this point? How far are you standing from where Christ is hanging on the Cross? What were you feeling as you were watching all this go on? Or were you walking towards Him? Or perhaps you were somewhere else?

Take some time and meditate on this.

Put yourself in the place of Joseph of Arimathea. Consider the things you would or would not do. How similar or different are your actions and emotions during this time?

As you prepare the body of Christ for burial, what is running through your mind?

As you hold the body of Christ, what would you have liked to say to Him?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, teach me to know what it means to minister to You. Teach me to remain faithful in seasons of hiddenness. For all that you have gone through for my sake, I truly thank you.

Further Lent Reading: Psalm 71:1-12, Isaiah 49:1-6, 1 Cor 1:18-31

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APPENDIX

Introduction to the Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Not all fighting is bad.

Saint Paul described Christian discipleship as “the good fight” (1 Tim 6:12-13). Many of us, however, do not know how to fight. We surrender too easily to anxieties and deep-rooted fears. We’re knocked out by inner demons and addictions. We live defeated lives.

The season of Lent offers us an opportunity to renew the good fight. In the next 10 devotions, we will meditate on appropriate Scripture passages, as well as glean spiritual insights from the early desert saints from Egypt.

Who were the desert saints? And how can they serve as spiritual guides to Christians in 21st century Malaysia?

The desert movement in the fourth century began with a few serious Christians who felt called to literally obey Jesus’ words to the rich young ruler: sell everything, give to the poor, and then follow Jesus (Luke 18:22). They gave up city comforts, rejected middle-class wealth, and walked away from the power of Christendom. Holed up in a cave or mud hut in the deserts of northern Egypt, they spent the day in prayer, basket-weaving, Scripture meditation and spiritual direction.

They saw the desert as a place of combat. They fought the devil; they experienced God’s help. They practiced spiritual disciplines and aspired to pray without ceasing. The goal of the desert saints was not ease, prosperity or success. Their goal was intimacy with God, and love of neighbor.

They patterned their lives according to Elijah, John the Baptist, Jesus and the apostle Paul – all of whom withdrew to the desert for prayer, spiritual struggle, discernment and ministry.

There are no deserts in Malaysia, only rainforests. Nevertheless, the counter-cultural lifestyle of the desert saints can teach us something about radical discipleship. To learn from them, we need to believe that:

APPENDIX

1. *Solitude is necessary for spiritual growth.* As Jesus served among the crowds, he found it necessary to withdraw into solitude to be with the Father (Mark 1:32-37; Luke 4:40-42, 5:15-16). In the same way, we must find it necessary to withdraw from noise, hurry and crowds.

2. *Discipleship requires relinquishment.* “Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples,” says Jesus (Luke 14:33). Jesus challenges us to a life of being gradually stripped of security, distractions and comfort. Relinquishment, though difficult, unshackles us from the bonds of secret sins and addictions.

3. *Training in godliness is necessary (1 Tim. 4:7-8).* Growth in godliness is impossible without training. Spiritual exercise help us grow. As you read the Lenten readings, we encourage you to pick one exercise to practice for a few months. Daily training will result in big changes over time.

Though the desert saints lived on the edge of civilization, they did not become irrelevant. They cared for the sick, gave to the poor and practiced hospitality. Some desert fathers and mothers became advisors to abbots, popes and kings, as well as peasants and paupers. They were the world’s first spiritual directors. At opportune times, they protested injustice, battled heretics and witnessed against a materialistic church.

In this collection of Lenten devotions, we have selected 10 short desert sayings for your reading edification. The sayings originated as questions asked by young disciples and answered by their spiritual mentors. Over time, these striking conversations were memorized, studied and passed on as oral tradition, and eventually written down in Syrian and Latin as *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

The Sayings have inspired famous Christian reformers through the centuries (e.g. St. Augustine, Chrysostom, Luther, Calvin and Wesley). The legacy of the desert saints endures because they teach us what it means to become true servants of Christ – weaned of ambition, greed and power – and radiating with love and compassion for people.

Alvin Ung

(This appendix was written by Alvin Ung.)

If you have questions or comments, you may contact him at alvinung@gmail.com)

OUR WRITERS

ALVIN UNG

Alvin Ung has worked in academia, stockbroking, journalism and telecommunications. He was recently vice president in leadership development at Khazanah. He loves the classics of Christian spirituality, and has lectured in Regent College (Vancouver) and Asia Theological Seminary (Manila). His book, *Work in Progress: Conversations on Growing Spiritually in the Workplace*, will be published by Eerdmans in 2009. Alvin is married to Huey Fern. They live in Kuala Lumpur.

JAMES KOH

James is a physician, trying and hoping to follow in his Father's footsteps in bringing healing and relief to fellow human beings, especially to those stricken with HIV and AIDS. He is awed that the worst of diseases brings out the best in people. He also lectures medical students, hoping to inspire a new generation of compassionate doctors. In his free time, he blogs and climbs mountains. He is married to Denise and has 2 children, Darlene and Ryan.

LIM SIEW LAN

Siew Lan desires to continue to learn about truth and life and their realities. She is grateful for the godly men and women in her life who encourage her to abide in Christ and to serve Him. Prior to working as an accountant in a church, she was lecturing as well as managing finance in the commercial sector. She adores her 4 year old twin nieces and enjoys learning about childlikeness from them. She relaxes by playing badminton, walking and swimming.

NG WAI LING

Wai Ling is a novice who is humbled by opportunities to facilitate spiritual retreats, teach spiritual formation and give spiritual direction to various individuals, groups, churches and seminaries. She hopes that she can contribute in a small way in helping others make sense of their journey with the Lord Jesus Christ. She is currently the Director of the Institute for Christian Ministry (ICM) of TRAC Malaysia. Her favorite pastime is connecting with one person at a time, over mocha or waffle ice-cream.

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