

Lent Meditation 2017

TRAC BOARD OF WORSHIP & MUSIC

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Board of Worship and Music

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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Chairperson of BoWM

LENT MEDITATIONS 2017

Editorial

Why another book of Lent Meditations from TRAC?--some might ask. There are many who would happily read the Gospels and meditate on them during Lent. Others want to set aside a special time of reading, prayer, and fasting (and give up on FB, TV, movies, etc.) They want something they can use through this season for special focus as they prepare for Easter. It is God who has made us all different.

Many also wanted something specifically from TRAC, prepared by the people closest to their heart and mind in the church setting. The Board of Worship and Music responded to this popular request. The writers have done their best in the assignment given them. They are from all over TRAC, with very different backgrounds and experiences. They each wrote out of their hearts and spirits as the Lord guided them. They share these devotions with you.

These devotions are based on readings from the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), which has a long history and is being used by many churches and denominations in the world-wide communion. We are going through these readings with Christians in the church universal. Rejoice, for we belong to such a fellowship and historical tradition.

The editorial team is very conscious that these readings have to be short, meditative, personal and yet faithful to Scriptures, sound in doctrine. Our prayer that these readings and devotional thoughts will lead each of us deeper into the Word of God, and into a keener appreciation of God's love for us,--not just for ourselves and our families, but also for our neighbours and for the whole world. May we all learn to proclaim the Gospel of the Suffering Messiah and the Risen Christ to all who have yet to know Him, His forgiveness and His salvation.

All Glory be to God on High!

The Editors

Day 1 (Ash Wednesday March 1)

Title: **Pray, Fast, Give**

Bible Reading : Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Key Verse : “Be careful not to practise your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them.”
(Matthew 6:1)

Devotional Commentary :

Today is Ash Wednesday—the beginning of Lent—traditionally, the 40 days of fasting before Easter, and a time to practise our discipline of praying, fasting, and giving. It is a penitential* season to help us return to God and to prepare for the celebration of Easter.

Why pray? Why fast? Why give? We pray to draw nearer to God to be strengthened and to seek God’s will. We fast to empty ourselves before God in an act of humility and repentance—especially in the confession of our sins and in solidarity with the world’s hungry. We give to the needy in gratitude to God’s generosity to us, and to meet the real needs of others.

When we pray, Jesus says, “Go into your room, close the door ...” (v. 6),—that special place where you can commune with God without being disturbed, distracted or having to perform. When we fast, it is in such a way that “will not be obvious to others ...” (v. 17). And we give to the needy without the need to remember that we gave, or to whom. Then we store up treasures in heaven!

Over to You :

Is it difficult for you to find the time to pray? Would it help if you scheduled it?

Jesus said “when you fast” (v. 16) not “if you fast”. Christians are encouraged to practise this spiritual discipline (though some cannot or should not fast, e.g. for medical reasons).

Do you find yourself too busy to know and to meet the needs of the needy? Why not ask your Church leaders how you may give to the needy?

Prayer :

Lord, help me during this Lent to pray, to fast, and to give in a way that honours You. Amen.

* Showing that you are sorry for having done something wrong.

Day 2 (Thursday 2 March)

Title: "Be My Disciple"

Bible Reading : Luke 9:18-25

Key Verses : "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me ... whoever loses their life for me will save it." (Luke 9:23-24)

Devotional Commentary :

Two crosses. One, the Lord's. The other, ours. The Lord's is one of suffering, rejection, death. Ours is one of self-denial, dying to self daily, "losing" our life and following Jesus.

Who you are? Does your life reflect that of Christ's disciple? How far are you willing to deny yourself, to take up your cross daily? The life you are living **now**—how scripturally different is it from that of your non-Christian family members, and friends? How willing are you to be Jesus' disciple?

Take a step back and reflect on the following:

What is Jesus calling me to deny?

What is the cross Jesus is asking me to take up daily?

How am I "losing" my life for Jesus?

What does it mean for me to follow Jesus?

What if we are not willing? Jesus says, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world and yet lose or forfeit their very self?" (v. 25) Are we trying our best to gain more and more of the whole world, in one way or another; to be popular, to be prosperous, and to be perpetually remembered for all time? If that is the case, Jesus says that you will lose your very self.

To be Christ's disciple is to remember that though He suffered and was rejected and killed, He was raised again to life. In becoming willing disciples, though we need to deny ourselves, to take up our cross daily, to follow Jesus, and to "lose" our life—we too will one day be "raised to life" in Him.

Over to You :

What changes do I need to make in my life that would help me to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ?

Prayer :

Lord, help me be Your disciple. Amen.

Day 3 (Friday, 3 March)

Title: **The Bridegroom Is with Them**

Bible Reading : Matthew 9:10-17

Key Verse : “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while He is with them?” (Matthew 9:15)

Devotional Commentary :

Jesus saw Matthew and said to him, “Follow Me.” Matthew got up and followed Jesus. And then—the dinner party! Many tax collectors and ‘sinners’ came and ate with Jesus and His disciples. The Pharisees saw this. They asked His disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?” (v. 11). The Teacher is being criticised! (Do they know the reason why the Teacher was at the dinner party?)

Then, as if this is not interesting enough at a dinner party, John’s disciples asked Jesus, “How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?” (v. 14) Now, the Teacher’s disciples are being criticised! (Do they not know whose disciples they are?)

He throws them a rhetorical question—“How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while He is with them?” Who is the bridegroom? What is Jesus really saying here? He is saying: “*At this moment, the Bridegroom is present, and I am He* .” There is no way then His disciples can be fasting when He is with them.

To lead His listeners further into a fuller understanding of who the Messiah is, Jesus illustrates with two object lessons. One, about mending an old garment with a piece of new, unshrunk cloth; and the other, about putting new wine into new wineskins. So, it is not ‘religious business’ as usual! The Jewish religion and its practices are being challenged to undergo a transformation. Either they go along with this transformation or they will ‘tear the garment and burst the wineskin’!

Over to You :

Am I aware of the presence and the work of God in my everyday life?
Is there any change I need to make to allow God to transform my life?

Prayer :

Lord, I want to live in constant awareness of Your presence. Amen.

Day 4 (Saturday 4 March)

Title: “**Follow Me**”

Bible Reading: Luke 5:27-32

Key Verse: “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” (Luke 5:32)

Devotional Commentary:

Why did Jesus call Levi (a.k.a. Matthew)? Was Levi righteous and upright? What was Jesus thinking?

Levi was a tax collector for the hated Roman authorities. They were regarded by the Jews as extortioners—in the same class as robbers and murderers (as they often extracted from the people more than they should). And as religious outcasts, they were banned from the synagogue.

With this sort of public opinion of such people, should not Jesus have stayed away from Levi? But He did not. Not only did Jesus call Levi to follow Him, He and His disciples also went to a great banquet that Levi hosted, and ate with Levi’s associates—the tax collectors and ‘sinners’.

What was the reaction of the Pharisees? They complained, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?” (For the Pharisees considered themselves holy and righteous.) Jesus broke this wall of separation through His response: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” In other words, should not a doctor be with the sick? Hence should not Jesus, the Saviour of the world, attend a banquet with sinners and lead them to repentance to receive His saving grace?

Over to You:

Do I know for sure that Jesus, in His love, never stops reaching out to me—a sinner—through His Word, through the people around me, and through various life experiences and situations? How am I following Jesus in His example of reaching out to ‘sinners’?

Prayer:

Lord, have mercy upon me, a sinner. Help me to follow You more closely. Grant me the courage to reach out to someone today with the Good News of Your redeeming love and saving grace. Amen.

First Sunday in Lent

Bible Reading: Matthew 4:1-11



Photograph Courtesy of Dr. Samuel Ong

Day 5 (Monday 6 March)

Title: **When Did We See You?**

Bible Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

Key Verse: "... whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine you did for me." (Matthew 25:40)

Devotional Commentary :

The *sheep* saw the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned, and they responded to their needs. The *goats* did nothing. Why? Were the 'eyes of their hearts' so different?

When Jesus rewarded the sheep for their concern and condemned the goats for their indifference, both responded with "**When** did we see you ...?" (vv. 37-39, 44). Whether they were sheep or goats, they were unaware of the significance of their response. For the sheep, it was most commendable,—it was their way of life. For the goats, there was no self-awareness that they were apathetic and unloving.

Jesus comes to us. Do we see Him?

The Methodist Movement, started by John Wesley, was not only a call to holiness and conversion; it was also deeply involved in '*sheep activities*'—reaching out to the poor, the needy, and the outcast. It is not those who constantly call Jesus "Lord, Lord" or talk incessantly about their faith who will inherit the Kingdom of God (v. 34); but rather those who, after confessing their Christian faith, serve others around them in tangible ways (e.g. William Booth & the Salvation Army, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Dom Hélder Câmara, World Vision)

We sin, not only when we act sinfully—the sin of commission. We sin also when we do not act—the sin of omission. The sin of the *goats* was clearly the sin of omission.

Over to You :

Am I a *sheep* or a *goat*? What acts of love and kindness are do-able for me at this point in my life? How would Jesus want me to respond to those in need?

Prayer:

Lord, help me to be like You. Amen.

Day 6 (Tuesday 7 March)

Title: **How You Should Pray**

Bible Reading: Matthew 6:7-15

Key Verse: "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling* like pagans ..." (Matthew 6:7)

Devotional Commentary :

Is the Lord's Prayer an important prayer? Certainly. It was important enough for the early Christians who prayed it three times a day (as recorded in an ancient Christian manual **Didache**).

What does the Lord's Prayer teach us? It teaches us to be concerned about God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will.

God's name is to be honoured because God is holy—and He is also our Father in heaven. God's kingdom? It is filled with wisdom, peace and joy and we do well to submit to God's rule and receive His spiritual guidance and blessings in our lives daily. God's will? It is to be discerned and obeyed, if we are the people after God's own heart.

Furthermore, the Lord's Prayer teaches us that we are to rely totally on God to provide for us. As those redeemed by God, we go to God to receive forgiveness for our sins. As those who are still on this earth, we ask not to be challenged with 'testings' beyond our ability to resist, but be delivered from evil that will harm us.

Finally, the Lord's Prayer encourages us to forgive others as we have been forgiven by God.

Over to You :

In my daily life, am I babbling or praying? Am I having close communion with God, my heavenly Father? Am I concerned with God's name, God's kingdom and God's will or my own? How is my FQ (Forgiveness Quotient)? Do I know my own sins? Or am I constantly focusing on other people's sins, and even on how they have hurt me and caused me to become bitter and unforgiving?

Prayer:

Lord, teach me to pray the Lord's Prayer with my heart, soul, and mind.
And grant me the daily strength to live it out. Amen.

*talking that is confused or silly and does not make sense.

Day 7 (Wednesday 8 March)

Title: Jesus – God’s Sign

Bible Reading: Luke 11:29-32

Key Verse: “... something greater than Jonah is here.” (Luke 11: 32)

Devotional Commentary:

When Jonah went to Nineveh, the people recognized him as having come from God to warn them to repent of their ways. When the Queen of the South, --i.e. the Queen of Sheba (southern Arabia or modern-day Yemen), went to test Solomon with hard questions, she recognized his wisdom as from God.

Why then could the people not recognize Jesus as One who had come from God? The crowds had seen Jesus perform many miracles, e.g. exorcising those with evil spirits (see Luke 4:31-37, 41; 8:26-39; 9:37-43; 11:14); resurrecting the dead (7:11-17; 8:40-42, 49-56); healing all kinds of sicknesses (4:38-40; 5:12-15; 17-26; 7:1-10; 8:43-48; 9:37-43), and feeding the five thousand (9:10-17).

Could the people not see that the message and the wisdom that Jesus had was greater than that of Solomon and Jonah? Could they not see that Jesus was pointing them to God? Or was it because of their stubbornness of heart and unwillingness to repent and to live a life of faith —that they had become ‘blind’ and ‘deaf’? Therefore, Jesus said, because of their stubbornness, the Queen of the South and the people of Nineveh would condemn them at the Judgment. (vv. 31-32)

Over to You:

Can I recognize in Jesus the Voice of God calling me to faith, to repentance, to obedience, and to a deeper walk with God?

Prayer:

Lord, forgive me for my spiritual ‘blindness’ and ‘deafness’.

Help me, in my everyday life, to respond to You in trust and in obedience. Amen.

Day 8 (Thursday 9 March)

Title: **Ask, Seek, Knock**

Bible Reading : Matthew 7:7-12

Key Verse : "... how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"
(Matthew 7:11)

Devotional Commentary :

The three words—"ask ... seek ... knock ..."—are in the present imperative tense in the Greek text. That is to say, we are instructed to be ever persistent. As we persist in our 'asking, seeking, knocking', our earnestness for what we desire will be tested. Jesus holds out this promise for those who persevere — "everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks find; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

However, everyone has experienced unanswered 'asking-seeking-knocking' even when we have continued in our faith. How then should we understand Jesus' promise? One way is to remember that God will answer in His own way, and in His own time. What we need, on the one hand, is a discerning heart to know how and when God has actually answered; and on the other hand, to persevere as we 'ask-seek-knock'.

Does God really want to give us what we desire? Jesus says that when children approach their earthly parents for something, these parents, without a doubt, will give good gifts to them. "**How much more** then will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!" Jesus ends with a further exhortation: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

That is to say, since we always desire that God grants what is good for us, we must do for others that which is good for them. It is putting ourselves in their situation—with their needs, struggles, aspirations—and responding with generosity, compassion, and love.

Over to You :

How have I been 'asking-seeking-knocking'? What are the needs of others that I can meet?

Prayer :

Lord, help me to persevere in my prayers, in 'asking-seeking-knocking'. Grant me the heart to love others the way I wish to be loved. Amen.

Day 9 (Friday 10 March)

Title: **What It Takes to Enter the Kingdom of Heaven**

Bible Reading : Matthew 5:20-26

Key Verse : “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20)

Devotional Commentary :

In the Singapore movie *Ah Boys to Men 3: Frogmen*, Warrant Officer Botak Lum said something about how, in life, one has to choose not only to do the right things but to do things right.

It is true that we may be able to do the right things— not transgressing against fellow human beings or not breaking the law. But do we do these with the right heart? Have we **never** been secretly self-righteous? While we may not outwardly insist on our rights, our goals, and things we covet, have we **never** elevated ourselves over other people? “I can’t believe he did that!” “I would never do what you did!” Are we doing the right things while pouring contempt on others? Our hearts matter more to God than even our most religious practices.

I used to read Matthew 5:20 with guilt. The preceding few verses appeared to me that Jesus was praising these men for their strict observance of the Law. Was their righteousness then to be the benchmark for God’s followers? In Matthew 5:21-26, however, Jesus takes His listeners to the root of self-righteousness,--sin in our hearts. We then can perhaps read 5:20 as this: “Unless you possess the righteousness that only God can bestow, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven—even if you did the right things.”

Prayer :

Almighty and merciful Father, the season of Lent reminds us that a cross on a barren hillside was waiting for Your wrath against sin to fall on Your Son. We escape Your wrath by Your mercy. We enter the Kingdom of Heaven by Your grace. Help us, therefore, to humbly esteem and nurture our relationships in order to honour You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Day 10 (Saturday 11 March)

Title: **Being Christ's Gospel Bearers**

Bible Reading: Matthew 5:43-48

Key verse: "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:44-45)

Devotional Commentary:

A Chinese saying goes, "I am not a bad person. I have never killed or robbed anyone." Sharing the Gospel of Christ is hard work indeed. But living the Gospel is even harder. It is not just about convincing non-believers that they need a Saviour. Our words hold no weight when we behave in real life as if the Gospel truth has not filled us with hope and our minds with light.

Two years ago, I became a mother. My medical background had taught me how to breastfeed my baby successfully. However, the difficulties got me doubting myself. I craved to boost milk production and increase the quality of the milk (—a myth, since breast-milk is designed to nurture babies even in times of famine). I joined an online network of breastfeeding mothers whose experiences certainly encouraged me. Unfortunately, the forum was also where many mothers launched their attacks on advice given by doctors with whom they did not agree. Worse still, some dispensed misguided medical advice of their own. I finally exited the network, and returned to conventional breastfeeding. My daughter is now a healthy two-year-old.

Aren't we all a little bit like this? The Gospel truth often seems too straightforward. *Love your enemies*, for example, seems too simplistic. Surely there are exceptions to the rule, aren't there?

How should we treat the people in this world who hate God, who reject Christ, and even persecute His people? The Gospel is clear about this: Love your enemies. God desires that we love impartially as He does because we are His children and He is our Father. Will you?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, what a beautiful privilege to be Your children — fellow-heirs with Christ! We pray that we might live worthy of our Christian identity in a world hostile to anything that stands for You. In Jesus' name, amen.

Second Sunday in Lent

Bible Reading: John 3: 1-17



Photograph Courtesy of Dr. Samuel Ong

Day 11 (Monday 13 March)

Title: **Overcoming Evil with Good**

Bible Reading : Luke 6:27-38 (see also Romans 12:9-21)

Key Verse : "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." (Luke 6:36)

Devotional Commentary :

Some people would interpret "offering the other cheek" and other forms of extravagant giving as ways to challenge the action of the perpetrators — non-violent acts of resistance (or counter-humiliation). Likewise, the instruction to heap burning coals on the heads of our enemies (Proverbs 25:21-22, Romans 12:20) has been often seen as divine permission to bring our enemies a red face of shame by setting their heads on fire, so to speak!

I imagine that many found going the extra mile uncomfortable. "Be merciful even as your Father is merciful," Jesus said (Luke 6:36). God does not ask us to *give in* to our enemies in order to humiliate them or so that their judgment would increase. Neither is He asking us to be wimps! We are to be like our Father in Heaven, and to treat others in the same way He deals with us, that is, with mercy and grace. And we are to show unconditional love to our enemies so that we make peace the Jesus way. After all, Jesus' death was about God making peace with His enemies. As He now calls us friends (John 15:15), let us join Him in His enterprise of peace-making. Let us also seek to overcome hostility with self-denying love.

May Lent be a season to contemplate how we may love those who might never love us (or Jesus) back.

Prayer :

Dear God, just as You have shown us extravagant mercy, give us the strength and courage to extend such grace and generosity to our neighbours—not just the nice ones, but also those who are not nice. Inspire us to make our enemies our friends and, better still, Your friends. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 12 (Tuesday 14 March)

Title: The Blessing of Christian Discipleship

Bible Reading: Matthew 23:1-12

Key Verses: “The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Matthew 23:11,12)

Devotional Commentary:

The religious leaders were working hard to create an opportunity for Jesus’ arrest. However, Jesus dodged their traps. Seven woes were pronounced on them. Matthew 23 is a satire on the sins which He hated most because they were futile religion: self-righteousness and hypocrisy. Jesus poked fun at everything they valued most. Who can forget that cartoonish picture of the Pharisees’ obsession with petty things—fussing with mint, dill, and cumin on the kitchen scale—which distracted them from the weightier matters of doing justice, showing mercy, and leading faithfully?

Jesus’ comment “You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel” referred to their practice of straining their drinking water through a cloth so that they would not accidentally swallow anything ceremonially unclean. The Pharisees had set up an elaborate system of rules to keep everyone from sinning. However, they were committing much more scandalous sins such as murder, hatred and pride. “You blind guides ... you are like whitewashed tombs ... you brood of vipers! How are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” We laugh, but I too certainly need to repent of my own hypocrisy.

This passage also urges me to embrace my Christian discipleship as a blessing (instead of a burden). Jesus does not teach us to view Christian discipleship as a roadmap to prestige, prominence, and authority—as the disciples of the Pharisees must have viewed their religious legalisms. Rather, Christian discipleship is about learning to serve quietly and gently, not for gain but out of gratitude. After all, we are assured of our greatness in God’s sight.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, empower us to respond to the call of Jesus—to deny ourselves, to take up our cross, and to follow His way of servanthood. Let us be truly His disciples. In His name, amen.

Day 13 (Wednesday 15 March)

Title: **Power Failure?**

Bible Reading: Matthew 20:17-28

Key Verses: “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave —just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:26-28)

Devotional Commentary :

The disciples were dismayed. Was not Jesus supposed to be a future king, a conquering Messiah? In this third Passion narrative, Jesus again referred to His betrayal and death . He would die at the hands of the much-hated Romans. What kind of kingdom is led by a loser?

But Mother Zebedee believed it would be a great kingdom. She asked for places of honour for her sons. She did not know that her wish would be granted —*sort of*. James and John, a.k.a. 'the Sons of Thunder', would indeed be great. But how they would suffer. James would be the first Apostle to be martyred while John would be persecuted, imprisoned, and exiled for his faith. They had been sure that they were able to "drink the cup". Nevertheless, the other disciples were furious and an argument followed.

Just think: What do you want for your children? What do you want for yourself, your family, or your church regarding the Kingdom of God? Indeed, we have a promising future and a glorious hope in Christ. Our confidence, however, is tempered by the knowledge that glory may come at immense personal cost. Will we see predicaments as God’s power failures or as promising signs? Jesus has shown us that the way of His Kingdom is the way of faith and humility, of the ordinary and a cross. Will we still follow Him?

Prayer:

Almighty and merciful Father, we have been conditioned to see the world through the lenses of power, prestige, and prosperity. Forgive us when we are tempted by worldly seductions, or feel bitter. Grant us the joy and peace to keep our faith in the face of the most humbling situations. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Day 14 (Thursday 16 March)

Title : Crossing the Chasm

Bible Reading : Luke 16:19-31

Key Verses : “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” (Luke 16:31)

Devotional Commentary :

This is a strange parable—and the only one in which someone is named.

Lazarus, poor and full of sores, represented those whom the Pharisees branded as *unclean* and *sinners* : law-breakers, tax collectors, the poor, the disabled, lepers, the insane, Gentiles and Samaritans. They were cursed and would go to the fiery Hades when they died. Jesus wanted to show them how wrong they were.

The Pharisees believed that they would depart along with the rich and the righteous to be with 'Father Abraham' when they died. ALL WRONG, Jesus implied. The parable also indicated that the *sinners* whom they disdained could be saved. How furious the listening Pharisees must then have been ! They who had prided themselves on being heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven were being told that they did not belong after all—not unless they took the Scriptures seriously, believed in Jesus and began to truly love God and people.

Prayer :

Heavenly Father, forgive us when we are overconfident of how qualified we are to enter Your Kingdom. Forgive us when we create a chasm between ourselves and those whom we feel are less qualified. Forgive us when we live so happily that we conveniently forget the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized—the very people whom You have mandated us to help. Help us to think of ourselves less (before it is too late) for the sake of Your Gospel. Yet, forgive us when we despair so much over our own failings that we forget that Jesus has already paid for our places at Your eternal feast with His death on the cross. May Christ and His great love be our vision, our delight, and the centre of our lives. In His name, amen.

Day 15 (Friday 17 March)

Title : **Man in the Mirror**

Bible Reading : Matthew 21:33-43

Key Verse : “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. (Matthew 21:43)

Devotional Commentary :

Matthew’s original audience was the Jewish Christian community recovering from the first Jewish riot against the Roman Empire, at which time Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed. The Pharisees had been the main opponents of those who saw Jesus as the Messiah and rightful interpreter of God’s Law.

Within the Church today, we might see those who embrace different traditions and doctrines as the fools. Or we might see those who do not agree with our leadership as being ungrateful. In either case, we will lose our ability to be self-critical.

Michael Jackson sang, “I’m starting with the man in the mirror; I’m asking him to change his ways. And no message could have been any clearer; if you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and then make a change ...”

Likewise, perhaps, we need to recognise that we, more often than not, identify more with the wicked tenants than with the master’s servants or future tenants. We easily come to assume, over time, that where we live, serve, and witness are all about what is due to us. Our pride takes over, and we lose sight of the One who had provided and done everything necessary in the first place. We might even reject Him.

What then might a repentant response look like?

Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, You still speak to Your followers today. Speak to us as we meditate on the parable. Reveal to us our positions in the story. Renew our minds so that we might receive Your grace and work toward reconciliation among all peoples. We are a people who witness to Your salvation — not by claiming our perfection and dominion over the world, but by acts of repentance and loving service. In Your name, amen.

Day 16 (Saturday 18 March)

Title: **The Parable of the Prodigal Father**

Bible Reading: Luke 15:11-32

Key Verse: “But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” (Luke 15:32)

Devotional Commentary :

I honestly struggle to see the father as a model of God. He is indeed lavish in his self-giving love, but he also seems overly indulgent when it comes to his younger son. He does not discipline his younger son, but empties his pockets in order to give in to the son’s demands. When the younger son returns home, daddy runs out in an undignified manner to welcome him, without questioning where he had been, what he had done, and his real intentions of returning. He even throws him a banquet while his older son labours on, uninformed. It is therefore hard to disapprove of the older son’s outburst.

Perhaps, the way to read the parable is this: if an imperfect, earthly father would seek so earnestly to reconcile with his son(s), what more our perfect Heavenly Father who loves us? He gave us His only begotten Son. Jesus was not sent to save just an elect group but the whole world! (John 3:16)

May Lent be a season of confronting the scars of self-centredness and self-righteousness in us by the perfect love of God in Christ. And then, let us bring God’s love to those who need reconciliation.

Prayer:

Merciful and gracious Father, we rejoice that You are perfect. Thank You for loving us with an everlasting love—that which led Jesus to the cross to pay the penalty for our sins—so that we can come home to You. We can rest assured that You will never let us down. You never fail to meet our needs and satisfy our deepest longings. Help us forgive the failings of those we love; help us love and honour them for Your sake. May Your peace that transcends all understanding guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. In His name, amen.

Third Sunday in Lent

Bible Reading: John 4: 5-42



Photograph Courtesy of Dr. Samuel Ong

Day 17 (Monday 20 March)

Title: **The Boy Jesus**

Bible Reading : Luke 2:41-52

Key Verse : “Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49)

Devotional Commentary :

The boy Jesus is a character shrouded in mystery. We have adequate information about the birth, adult ministry, and death and resurrection of Jesus. But his adolescence? It feels strange to read about Jesus without supernatural events of angels, miracles, and the like. The story of Jesus’ parents losing Him and finding Him in the Temple seems so ... ordinary —so human. It could have happened to any other kid.

But although the circumstances seem ordinary, the response of Jesus to his mother is extraordinary. This is the first time the Bible records Jesus referring to God as His Father, in contrast to His mother’s admonishment: “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.” In one simple child-like statement, Jesus identifies Himself as God’s child first, and as Joseph and Mary’s child, second. In doing so, His priorities are made clear. Nevertheless, He seeks to please God and is obedient to His earthly parents.

Over to you :

Who are you? An accountant? A student? A husband? A mother? Or are you God’s child, a sinner saved by grace? What is your primary identity in your home, in school, at work, or in the world? This determines your priorities.

Prayer :

Lord, we thank You for the extraordinary privilege of being able to approach You freely and call You "Father". Amidst our cluttered lives of multiple roles and identities, help us to identify ourselves as Your children first and foremost, and may the way we live our lives reflect that truth. We pray this in the name of Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

Day 18 (Tuesday 21 March)

Title: **The Unmerciful Servant**

Bible Reading: Matthew 18:21-35

Key Verse: "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"
(Matthew 18:33)

Devotional Commentary :

"Serves them right!" "Just desserts!" "It's only fair!"

How often do we invoke righteousness and justice to embellish something as anti-Christian as unforgiveness? There is nothing quite like the knowledge that someone else was wrong to light in us the fire of indignation that can blaze for an entire lifetime. Perhaps it is because, as sinners, we are all too familiar with the feeling of guilt and knowing that we have messed up and hurt someone. Then we try to downplay, justify, and cover up our wrongdoings. So when someone wrongs us, suddenly we are guiltless for a change! The sinner has become the saint! So we hunker down in the fort we have built out of our anger and self-pity and lay siege against those who have hurt us so, believing that our God of righteousness and justice is on our side.

But nothing could be further from the truth. Grace is freely given by God, but having received grace, we must pass it along to those who need it from us. To withhold grace from another is tantamount to telling God that everyone deserves their punishments, except us.

Jesus teaches us another way—the way of sacrificial love that enables us to forgo our own rights, and to forgive those who do not deserve forgiveness—the way of the cross.

Over to you: Is there someone in your life who does not deserve your forgiveness? That is who we were to God. Are you truly aware of how antagonistic you once were to God before receiving His forgiveness through Christ? It is easy to be merciless only if you have forgotten what it was like to receive mercy.

Prayer: Lord, forgive us when we apply double standards to grace and mercy. Help us to see those who have hurt us through Your eyes of compassion. Amen.

Day 19 (Wednesday 22 March)

Title: **The Fulfilment of the Law**

Bible Reading : Matthew 5:17-19

Key Verse : "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them." (Matthew 5:17)

Devotional Commentary

Everyone is familiar with the Ten Commandments. But not all of us know them all by heart, and all of us struggle with obeying all ten of them—and especially so when we consider Jesus' teaching regarding sin as beginning in the heart instead of mere outward action.

Now, just consider this: according to the rabbis, there are 613 commandments in the Torah alone. It is no wonder that the disciples were hoping that Jesus had come to abolish the Law. After all, this rag-tag bunch of common people were not from among the learned Pharisees and teachers of the Law, nor did they have the time and the luxury for all the legal niceties. So what hope was there for them in keeping the Law and pleasing God?

But Jesus did not come to lower the standards. He fulfilled the Law in its entirety by His sinless life, and thereby gave them both hope and opportunity to take His righteousness upon themselves by following Him. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Over to you :

Have you been tempted to lower the standards for the sort of life to which you are called as a follower of Jesus? Flee towards holiness.

Prayer :

Merciful God, we admit that Your standards are good, yet we find ourselves straining in the opposite direction far too often. Inspire us towards greater obedience to Your ways, and discipline us when we are too stubborn to obey, so that we might experience freedom in the centre of Your good, pleasing, and perfect will. In the name of Jesus, we ask. Amen.

Day 20 (Thursday 23 March)

Title: **Jesus and Beelzebul**

Bible Reading : Luke 11:14-23

Key Verse : "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."
(Luke 11:23)

Devotional Commentary :

There are always several levels of ambiguity when it comes to the spiritual realm. People generally approach the subject of spirits and exorcisms with a good dose of fear of the uncertain and unknown. Yet Jesus' words on the subject gives us no cause for doubt regarding two things: 1) the authority of Jesus over Satan, and 2) the exclusive duality of the spiritual situation.

Everyone is either on Jesus' side or Satan's side; there is no middle ground, no other option, no straddling the fence. And Jesus' side is the absolute winning side —always. Such logic is so plain to see that it is only by the deceit of Satan and the stubborn self-absorption of humanity that the whole world is not yet on Jesus' side.

Sadly, the people chose to reject the testimony of Jesus and His healing, and attributed His authority to Satan. Many still do. How would you choose?

Over to you :

Search your inmost self for signs of doubt or fear when it comes to the spiritual realm. Are you entirely sure you are on the side of Jesus in this battle? If you are, there can only be confidence in His absolute authority.

Prayer :

Triumphant God, we praise You for the victory we have over Satan through Jesus Christ. Lead our eyes away from our own inadequacies to the security that we have in belonging to Jesus. Grow us in prayer and the knowledge of Your Word, so that we might be strong and courageous to face any spiritual battle to be fought. We ask this in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Day 21 (Friday 24 March)

Title: **The Greatest Commandment**

Bible Reading : Mark 12:28-34

Key Verse : “To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”
(Mark 12:33)

Devotional Commentary :

There is an inherent ugliness to legalism that repulses God and man/woman alike. From the mechanical apology that a child offers to someone they have hurt to the mindless mouthing of worship lyrics, or carrying out an obligation for the sake of ritual or duty, such actions usually demonstrate a general lack of sincerity, intention, and conscientiousness. Perhaps that was what made Jesus so opposed to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. Not only were they deluding themselves of their righteousness and standing before God, they were actually misleading those under their authority down a path of spiritual despair and social apathy that only cared about one's own righteousness. This episode does remind us, however, that there were those who genuinely tried to seek after the truth.

The most defining aspect of love is that it is always other-centred, and this is summed up in the Greatest Commandment—loving God and loving others (your neighbour) instead of only loving self. Let your love for others inform your attitude and behaviour.

Over to you :

Take time to evaluate your relationships. Are there any inconsistencies between how you behave towards God and other people (especially fellow believers) and the truest innermost thoughts of your heart?

Prayer :

Loving God, reveal to us the depths of our being, so that we might remain absolutely consistent in heart, body, mind, and soul. Teach us Your ways of love, and shield us from all manner of hypocrisy and pretence. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Day 22 (Saturday 25 March)

Title : **The Birth of Jesus Foretold**

Bible Reading : Luke 1:26-38

Key Verse : “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:38)

Devotional Commentary :

This particular passage is often recounted in the Christmas story, and the wonder of the coming of Jesus overshadows everything else. Rightly so. Jesus was and is and always will be the centre of the story.

But let us take a step back for a moment and consider Mary. It is easy to think of her as being blessed among women (as Elizabeth declared), but we have the benefit of 2,000 years of hindsight. We know just how big Mary’s part was in the picture—she did not then.

Place yourself in Mary’s sandals. Not only are you terrified at the sight and words of a supernatural messenger of God, you are being told that you would become pregnant although you are not yet married! This threatened not only Joseph, her betrothed, but also the rest of her life as she knew it—her social standing, the security of her future, everything! Yet after the messenger promised her that “nothing is impossible with God”, Mary responded with complete submission. Her focus was on the assignment and the promise she was given—not her predicament or the scary unknown that was to come.

Over to you :

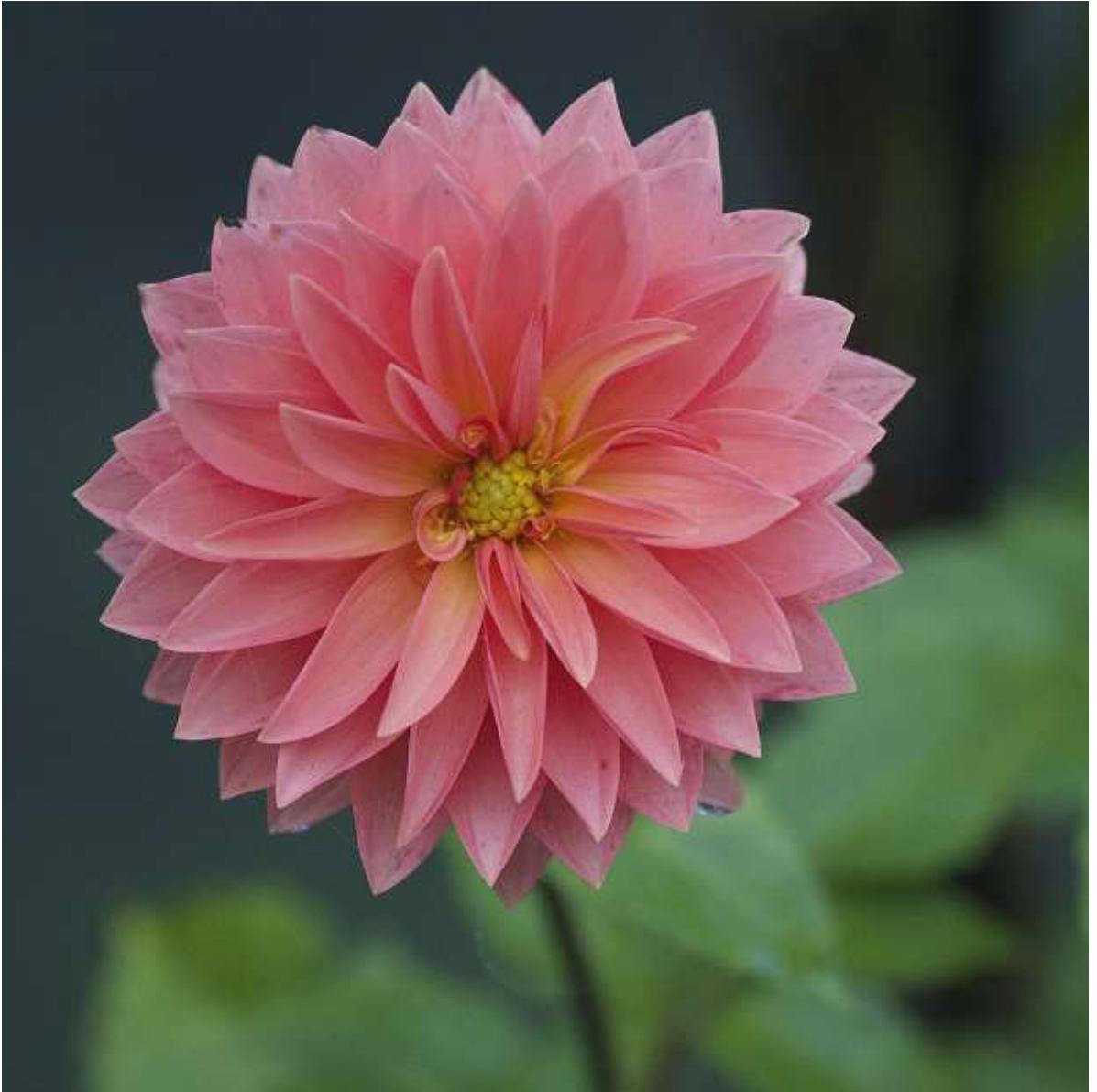
Where is God calling you to submit to Him in this season of your life?

Prayer :

Lord, give us a heart of submission, that we might trust in You and Your plans for us. Even if we cannot see how things will unfold, we know that You are infinitely greater than our fears and doubts. Keep our eyes focused on the certainty of Your goodness and Your greater purpose. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Bible Reading: John 9: 1-41



Photograph Courtesy of Dr. Samuel Ong

Day 23 (Monday 27 March)

Title: **Jesus Heals an Official's Son**

Bible Reading : John 4:43-54

Key Verse : "Go," Jesus replied, "your son will live." The man took Jesus at his word and departed. (John 4:50)

Devotional Commentary :

Faith is something that we as followers of Jesus discuss, promote, and passionately champion. But when the rubber hits the road—when faith requires commitment and drastic action that wrestles with our senses—we are often sorely tempted to shy away from such radical faith. The temptation is for us to reason our way into a sort of 'middle ground', where the actions of faith that we take are conditional upon what our senses validate.

The official approached Jesus to heal his son, which took faith. But for him to take Jesus at His word and return home without Jesus following him, believing that his son would be healed even without Jesus coming to lay hands or pray over the child was an incredible act of faith. It is a faith that goes beyond experience or expectations. We may not know his name, but he surely was a man of faith.

Over to you :

How convinced are you in the identity and authority of Jesus as Lord over all Creation? How often have you struggled with your faith and your hope in Christ? How much do you trust Him? Do your actions affirm or belie your conviction?

Prayer :

Father, we ask You for faith—the kind of faith that is harmonious with Your will and ways. Help me to act in accordance with this sort of faith on a day-to-day basis. I pray this in the mighty name of Jesus, my Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Day 24 (Tuesday 28 March)

Title : **The Healing at the Pool**

Bible Reading : John 5:1-18

Key Verse : In his defence Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” (John 5:17)

Devotional Commentary :

When we read the story of Jesus healing the lame man at Bethesda, the response of the Jewish leaders is so inappropriate that it is bound to evoke a sense of the ludicrous from us. After all, the man had been lame for 38 years, and now he could finally walk! And all they cared about was how he was carrying his mat on the Sabbath? Yet far too often, we identify with this kind of short-sighted folks without realizing it. Even when it is about good things like proper procedure, good stewardship, or even accountability, there is always a danger of missing the point in the midst of our pursuit to please God or to do His will.

But Jesus saw the man’s need, did the necessary and healed him. He did the work that God the Father gave Him to do.

Over to you :

Are the good things in life stifling or hindering you and others from doing God’s work? Take this time to examine your motives towards things like discipline, rules, guidelines, and the like.

Prayer:

Father, forgive us when we get so focused on doing things the proper way that we lose focus of doing things Your way. Keep us flexible to mould ourselves according to everything Your will desires. Guide us by Your Spirit. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen

Day 25 (Wednesday 29 March)

Title: **What a Relationship!**

Bible Reading: John 5:19-29

Key Verse: “Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.” (John 5:24)

Devotional Commentary:

What a great intimacy and connectedness between Father and Son (v. 20)! Do you not long for that: to be included in the inner circle, to understand what God is doing in this world? Jesus is saying that we too can have this intimate relationship when we put our trust in Him. His vigorous and unique expression: ‘I tell you the truth’ (vv. 19, 24, 25—‘verily, verily’ in older translations) is repeated 24 times in John’s Gospel, seven of them in this chapter and the next. We too need such ‘Amen’ assurance.

But there is more! Having infuriated His critics by His claim to direct access to the Father (v. 18), Jesus makes the incredible assertion that He will raise the dead as judge on the last day. Jesus’ identity as God’s Son is not just a theological claim. It is a living relationship that directs, motivates and energises His ministry. His ministry is rooted in His Father’s love.

But the unity of Father and Son also points to the crucial role of relationship in the Godhead and helps us glimpse a little of what it means to be made in the image of God. We are made for relationship, even though our sinful selves push us away from one another and make us think that independence is the highest human value. True spirituality overcomes separateness and binds us to God through the Son. What joy!

Over to You:

Luxuriate today in the arms of your Father God, enjoying the incredible privilege you have of calling Him ‘Abba’ due to the sacrifice of the Son and the enabling of the Spirit.

Prayer:

Lord, we thank You that You show us the heart of the Father, and You draw us closer to His love. Amen.

Day 26 (Thursday 30 March)

Title : **Witnesses to Life in Jesus**

Bible Reading: John 5:30-47

Key Verse: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me." (John 5:46)

Devotional Commentary:

There is the feel of a courtroom in this passage. Jesus calls three witnesses to give evidence about His true identity. **First**, He cites John the Baptist. John had baptized Jesus and heard the voice from heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son." **Secondly**, Jesus cites the work He is doing—the teaching and miracles already give signs of who Jesus is. **Thirdly**, He cites the testimony of the Scriptures: that He is the one of whom Moses wrote. The whole of God's revelation points to the truth of Jesus as the Christ.

But to recognise the truth of these testimonies, the Jewish leaders need to have hearts that are open to believe. Their hearts are closed. The irony here is that Jesus is actually talking to professional 'Scripture searchers'—men who have spent years studying the Torah and who teach others what it says. They revere Moses as the Lawgiver, yet it will be Moses who will ultimately condemn them for their unbelief (vv. 45, 46). For all their knowledge, they remain in ignorance, lacking the humility and love to discern the truth about Jesus as God's Word incarnate.

The problem with these religious leaders was not that they ignored Scripture, but that, effectively, they worshipped it. Yet somehow they missed the point of searching the Scriptures, which is to encounter the living God (vv. 39, 40). When we do not let the Bible lead us to God, we turn even the Scriptures, God's Word, into an idol.

Over to You:

What pointed you to Jesus? You have read the Scriptures, now come to Jesus for life. Let His Spirit touch your spirit as you allow Him to rejuvenate you, refresh your confidence levels, renew your integrity and focus your priorities.

Prayer:

Lord, let my love of what I read in Your Word never surpass my love for You. Amen.

Day 27 (Friday 31 March)

Title : **Mission and Understanding**

Bible Reading: John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30

Key Verse : "I am not here on my own authority, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me." (John 7:28,29)

Devotional Commentary:

The people were just not into the kind of Christ or Messiah that Jesus appeared to be. They wanted one they could define, or even confine. So do most of us, if we are honest. We want a tangible system with standards that can be easily measured. Within the law code, though, there is little room for surprises or the unpredictability of God.

The Jews are unable to understand this Jesus; they are unable to interpret His words in anything but the narrowest of perspectives. Similarly, when the people of Jerusalem claim to know where Jesus is from (v. 27), by which they mean insignificant Nazareth, John is ironically highlighting the narrowness of their perspective.

The root problem for the Jews and the priests and Pharisees is not **what** they think they know, but **whom** they do not know! One group thinks they know where Jesus is from and another speculates where He will go to, but none really knows the God who sent Jesus into the world (vv. 28, 29).

It is only when we grow in intimacy with God that our eyes are opened wider and we are able to view all things in the broader perspective of the divine. To know God, it is necessary to know about God. It is, however, quite possible to know all about God and yet not know Him at all.

Over to You:

Reflect on how well you know your God. Why not write Him a letter in which you seek to know Him more?

Prayer:

Lead me deep into the sources of faith, O God. Take me beneath the surface so that I may see and understand the great and invisible foundation realities in Your will and love. Amen.

Day 28 (Saturday 1 April)

Title : **The Silent Witness**

Bible Reading: John 7:37-52

Key Verse: "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." (John 7:38)

Devotional Commentary:

The Pharisees had sent their temple police to arrest Jesus, but after listening to Jesus' teaching they came back singing His praises! "Surely you have not been deceived too, have you?" sneered the Pharisees (v. 47), and went on to belittle all those who had been 'taken in'. But one of their number, Nicodemus, spoke up, quietly remarking that it was not legal to judge someone without hearing them first. Sarcastically they turned on him, and he said no more.

Nicodemus had already met Jesus. In fact he had sought Him out one night and listened attentively to Him. Why? Presumably because he had been impressed with Jesus, and felt that what Jesus was saying rang true. For Nicodemus knew that despite all his learning, he lacked a first-hand knowledge of God. When Jesus told him that he needed to be 'born again', he struggled to understand what that meant.

But there is no doubt he was on the side of Jesus. Yet he could only make a half-hearted protest against his fellow Councillors' vehement opposition to Jesus. Why did he not speak up? It was only after the death of Jesus that he would team up with another secret disciple of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea, and together they would give their Lord an honourable burial.

Before we pass judgment on Nicodemus, we have to ask ourselves how we face up to opposition, argument, or ridicule. Are we content just to be secret disciples or silent witnesses?

Over to You:

Our world needs bold people motivated by God's kingdom. Jesus calls for courageous, tenacious Gospel-proclaimers for our times: Pray for yourself and others.

Prayer:

Lord, forgive me for keeping silent when I could speak and sitting back when I should act. But thank You that I can speak and act today. Help me do so. Amen.

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Bible Reading: John 11: 1-45



Photograph Courtesy of Dr. Samuel Ong

Day 29 (Monday 2 April)

Title : **Guilty, But Not Condemned!**

Bible Reading: John 8:1-11

Key Verse: “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.” (John 8:11)

Devotional Commentary:

The scribes and the Pharisees had set a cunning trap to try and discredit Jesus. By asking Him publicly to pass judgment on the woman caught in adultery, they knew that He would lay Himself open to charges from either the Jewish religious authority or the Roman administration of justice. The woman was only being used as a pawn in the game of attempting to frame Jesus. (There was no mention of the man involved with her.)

They must have found it galling as Jesus seemingly ignored them, writing in dirt on the ground. Finally, He straightened up, faced them and threw out the challenge for anyone without sin to throw the first stone.

The woman’s accusers got Jesus’ message and slowly slunk away. They had no answer, no excuses, but at least they had the grace to recognise that they too were not “without sin”. Jesus the sinless Son of God was the only one who could have cast the first stone, but His way was to offer the woman a new start—with the solemn injunction, “Do not sin again.” Her sin was not condoned, and Jesus asked her to leave it behind. But he refused to condemn her, because there was no one now to bring a charge. Through Jesus, we too have received the same glorious opportunity and the same command.

Over to You:

In which areas of your life are you most conscious of having received God’s forgiveness? Are there areas where you still need to know release? Pray for this now.

Prayer:

Jesus Christ, my Lord and Saviour, grant me the courage to look at my own personal sins, the grace to repent, the humility to ask for forgiveness and the joy of accepting freedom in Your name. Instil in me strong habits of virtue in place of the sins to which I have become accustomed. Amen.

Day 30 (Tuesday 3 April)

Title: **Lifting Up the Son of Man**

Bible Reading: John 8:21-30

Key Verse: “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.” (John 8:28,29)

Devotional Commentary:

The discussion between the Pharisees and Jesus continues as to Jesus’ identity and origins. Jesus warns that they will die in their sins because they refuse to believe in Him.

The high priests and Pharisees kept misunderstanding Jesus. The trouble, as Jesus states, is that they come from opposing worlds. Jesus continually spoke from the viewpoint of heaven, while theirs was of earth. It was clear that they did not know either Jesus or His heavenly Father. They would know, Jesus said, when they see Him ‘lifted up’. They would know not only Jesus’ true identity but also His true origins.

One of the functions of the cross is to bring a full revelation of who Jesus is. The cross is pivotal and the preaching of the cross continues to do what it did when Jesus spoke these words. Jesus came not only to teach, but also to die. At the cross we come to know both the Father and the Son, and thus begin to enjoy eternal life.

Over to You:

Do you always do the things that are pleasing to Jesus? In what ways does your lifestyle validate (or invalidate) your claim to be a follower of Christ? Pray for those in your family and amongst your friends who still have not recognised that Jesus is the one who was ‘lifted up’.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, grant this day, to direct and sanctify, to rule and govern my heart and body, so that all my thoughts, words and deeds may be according to Your Father's law and thus may I be saved and protected through Your mighty help. Amen.

Day 31 (Wednesday 5 April)

Title: **Behaving as Children**

Bible Reading: John 8:31-42

Key Verse: "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do what Abraham did."
(John 8:39)

Devotional Commentary:

Family resemblances are discerned not just in looks, but also in behaviour! Our spiritual paternity is also evident in our behaviour. The Jews made much of their privileged status of being Abraham's descendants (v. 33). Jesus, however, tells them that, based on their murderous intentions towards Him, they are, in fact, children of the devil! They cannot be Abraham's children because they do not do what Abraham did (v. 39). They refuse to embrace the will of God as it unfolds before them in Christ.

Whatever we might confess with our mouths, the true indicator of our spiritual paternity is our conduct. And if our conduct does not show that we are for Christ, then it shows we are against Him. The middle ground is conspicuously absent from Jesus' dialogue with the Jews. Being 'for Christ' means being 'full on' for Christ. We must not pay benevolent lip service to Him and His teaching, but rather cultivate a devotion to Jesus and what He taught, no matter what (v. 31).

Children of God obey and welcome Jesus, and are open to the possibility that the truth is not necessarily identical to what they may think or believe. They do not fall back on their ancestry, heritage or tradition, but on the truth that sets them free (v. 32). Any claim to spiritual heritage is irrelevant if we are not listening to Jesus and holding to His teaching.

Over to You:

Think back and thank God for those from whom you have inherited your understanding of Christian teaching, be they teachers, preachers, parents or others.

Prayer:

Lord, help me to treasure the traditions that have taught me faith in You, and may Your truths continually jolt me out of old ways and into new ones. Help me discern the right way forward without losing the essential things from the past. Amen.

Day 32 (Thursday 6 April)

Title: **What's in a Name?**

Bible Reading: John 8:51-59

Key Verse: "Very truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58)

Devotional Commentary:

Jesus does not retreat before the insults of His opponents. Instead He makes another absolute claim about Himself (v. 51), but again His opponents misunderstand, believing that Jesus is talking about earthly death. Caught between fury and laughter at the absurdity of His claim, they have no inkling of the eternal, resurrection life He has come to bring.

"Are you greater than Abraham? Who do you think you are?" (v. 53). Then Jesus appropriates for Himself the name 'I am'—the name God gave Moses to call Him when He revealed Himself in the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). Yes, Jesus is greater than Abraham. He was with God in the beginning; He is the Word, the true light that gives light to everyone. He claims His divinity in no uncertain terms.

But at this point Jesus has pressed His claims beyond anything that the Jerusalem crowd could tolerate. They pick up stones to throw at Him--not just the odd brickbat, but a serious attempt to stone Him to death.

Ultimately, it is not Jesus' actions that outrage His opponents, but His absolute claims about Himself. In our pluralistic world, where absolute claims are not welcome, we need to proclaim the truth that Jesus is 'the way and the truth and the life'.

Over to You:

What His supporters or detractors might have called Jesus is vital to our understanding of His teachings and their significance. A knowledge of what others call Jesus in our world today is essential to our mission imperative, to build the Kingdom of God. List names that describe Jesus as you have experienced Him. Meditate on each name and its significance for you, and pray as you do so.

Prayer:

Jesus, grant me such a knowledge of You that I may worship You with all my heart as my Lord. All praise to Your great name! Amen.

Day 33 (Friday 7 April)

Title: **Faith in God's Son**

Bible Reading: John 10:31-42

Key Verse: "Jesus answered them, '...I am God's Son...the Father is in me, and I in the Father.'" (John 10: 36, 38)

Devotional Commentary:

Jesus was teaching in the Temple at Solomon's Colonnade. The unbelieving Jews opposed Him and accused Him of blasphemy. Jesus quoted the Scriptures from Psalm 82:6 where God calls mortals "gods". He wanted to show He was in fact "set apart" and "sent into the world" by the Father. He is certainly a lot greater than those who were called "gods". He further declared that the Father is in Him and He is in the Father. (v.38)

But the Jewish unbelievers did not have faith in Jesus' words, and neither did they believe Him on account of His miraculous works. They rejected, opposed and accused Him of falsehood to the extent of stoning Him for blasphemy. But many others did believe and follow Him.

Over to you:

We are Christians, but have we slipped into basing our faith on what good Jesus brings, or does for us, rather than on who He is? Do we sometimes doubt when our prayers are not answered and our faith falters? In faith, God's Spirit confirms and convinces our spirit that Jesus Christ is God's Son. How firmly are we reminded of our faith in Jesus Christ every day in prayer?

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, search me. Forgive me for knowingly or unintentionally falling, and even failing You while protecting my own interest and will. Help me to live out my faith always in You as God's Son, my Saviour and Master. Amen.

Day 34 (Saturday 8 April)

Title: **Standing Against Jesus or For Jesus**

Bible Reading: John 11:45-53

Key Verse: "So from that day on they plotted to take his life." (John 11:53)

Devotional Commentary:

Jesus had just raised from the dead Lazarus, -- who had actually been buried in the tomb for four days. The news quickly spread all over. The common people were flocking to Jesus (and also Lazarus) and putting their faith in Him.

The leaders, however, were even more resolved to destroy Him, in order to safeguard their own positions and status. Interestingly, the prophesy which Caiaphas unwittingly pronounced "that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." (v. 50) was fulfilled beyond what he could ever have imagined. It served "not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one." Its impact continues till today even after two millennia.

Over to you:

Imagine that you were among the disciples and the common people when all these things were happening. How would you have felt about your leaders' course of action?

Bring yourself back to the present and think of what you would do in the face of adversities against the truth you believe in. If you are forced to disown Christ or even to deny Him, where will your strength come from?

Prayer:

Father God, You are always my source of hope, strength and life. Teach me to deepen my faith till it is rooted firmly in You. Help me as Christ's disciple not to waste or ignore the opportunities to bear witness for You whether the going is good or bad. Prepare me because I do not know what the future may hold. I humbly ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sixth Sunday in Lent

Bible Reading : Matthew 21:1-11



Photograph Courtesy of Dr. Samuel Ong

Day 35 (Monday 10 April)

Title: **Motive as Christ's Disciple**

Bible Reading: John 12:1-11

Key Verse: Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial."
(John 12:7)

Devotional commentary:

Today's passage centres on a dinner party at Bethany hosted by the family of Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary, after Lazarus had been miraculously raised from the dead by Jesus. Let us see who were present and what their motives were:

1. Lazarus' family was at home. They all loved the Lord and were devoted to Him. Mary anointed Jesus' feet with an expensive perfume and wiped His feet with her hair. Their motive was to honour and express their devotion and gratitude to the Lord.
2. Jesus' disciples' motive was to follow and to love the Lord, except for Judas who had already planned to betray Jesus. What might his motive be?
3. The large crowd of Jews wanted to see both Jesus and Lazarus. Their motive ranged from mere curiosity to wanting to learn more, and even to believe in Jesus.
4. The chief priests were not at the party, but they wanted to kill both Jesus and Lazarus whom they felt were threats to their positions and own agendas.

Over to you:

What was your motive for following Jesus when you first believed in Him as God your Saviour? What is your motive now as His disciple?

Ask yourself: Are my motives based on my preferences, my wishes, my well-being, my personal benefit, or even that of my loved ones? Or are they driven by what I believe God wants me to do?

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, open my spiritual eyes to see and ears to listen to Your Spirit in my heart. When prompted, help my spirit to obey so that my motives for every decision, big and small, will honour You. In Jesus' Name I ask. Amen.

Day 36 (Tuesday 11 April)

Title: **To Be Like Christ our Servant King**

Bible Reading: John 12:20-36

Key Verse: “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.” (John 12:26)

Devotional Commentary:

There were Greek proselytes worshipping in Jerusalem. They wanted to see Jesus. Who or what were they looking for? A super-star? A pop idol? Or a Suffering Saviour?

Like a grain of wheat that has to die before many more new grains can be produced, Jesus said He would need to die, to enable many to live. By so doing He serves His Father's plan by fulfilling His mission for our salvation. Simultaneously, He glorifies His Father God and He was glorified. Then a voice from heaven (intended for His followers) attested to Jesus' mission and His impending death. He offered His own life in order that we may live eternally.

Jesus calls us to serve Him by following Him, and by dying to ourselves. Our Lord also made two important promises for those who serve and follow Him. First He will always be with them. Secondly, His Father will honour them. What a great privilege and honour!

Over to you:

Think over all you did in the last three days. Were you thinking and acting like our Lord, not waiting to be served but seeking to serve others? What can we do for Him? How do we serve God?

Jesus gave up His life and died to fulfil God's plan. Are you willing to lay down your life as a grain of wheat,--to die for Him, and then blossom again into new life?

Prayer:

Thank you Lord Jesus for your immense sacrifice on the cross at the most critical hour in human history—yes, for me too. Embolden me to serve and follow You faithfully always and to serve others in Your name. Amen

Day 37 (Wednesday 12 April)

Title: **Glorify God in Serious Honesty?**

Bible Reading: John 13:21-32

Key Verse: "... God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once ..." (John 13:32)

Devotional Commentary:

Today's passage is probably one of the several moments in Jesus' ministry that was filled with intrigue, tension, doubt, suspicion and anxiety of who, what, when, how and so what.

Jesus once again predicted His betrayal. He was deeply troubled, and not just for Himself. Our Lord knew exactly who His betrayer was, what he was going to do, and when. Knowing that Satan was prompting Judas, our Lord warned him one last time. (See also Mathew 26:24. "But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man!") However, the traitor had already made his plans and was not going to change his mind. He had rejected his Lord.

But Jesus' death served to fulfil God's plan for the world, for you and for me. The Son would glorify God the Father, and God would glorify the Son in Himself.

Over to you:

We profess that we believe and accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. How is our life reflecting our faith and discipleship in Jesus Christ?

How much have you agonised about what it means for you to obey and do God's will?

Pause to consider if we have seriously brought glory and honour to God the Father.

Prayer:

Father God, forgive my careless words and behaviour towards You as my God and Saviour. At times I do not take You seriously and have dishonoured Your name, instead of bringing You glory. This often takes place in my workplace, at home and even in church and among my Christian community or group. Teach me to be honest. Let me never betray or reject You. In Christ's name, I pray. Amen.

Day 38 (MAUNDY THURSDAY 13 April)

Title: Participate in the Lord's Self-Abasement

Bible Reading: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Key Verse: "Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.'" (John 13:8)

Devotional Commentary:

Jesus' washing of His disciples' feet on the day before Passover is often highlighted as lessons on our Lord's symbolic action, teaching humility by the example of Himself getting down to do the work. What was our Lord's intent?

This is clear from His answer to Peter who initially reacted in shock and impetuously refused to be washed. Jesus stated that unless Peter permitted his feet to be washed by his Master, he would have no part in his Teacher's life and work.

If we pause to consider John Stott's¹ idea here, Peter's initial protest parallels the need of those seeking repentance and faith for a bodily "bath" akin to baptism, referred to as justification or being spiritually made clean and right before God. Foot-washing may symbolize our regular meeting and communing with the Lord thereafter, as we seek forgiveness.

By washing the disciples' feet, Jesus, their Master and Lord, had set them an example of humble and lowly service, even like that of a slave. They too must do the same for one another. Then He went on to give them a new commandment: "Love one another, as I have loved you." (v. 34)

Over to you:

Bearing in mind our Lord's example, are we whole-hearted participants in His command to love? Do we love selectively or indiscriminately? Or only at times and places convenient to our own schedules?

Prayer:

Father God, I confess my unfaithfulness and ingratitude despite all You have done for me. Teach me to love You and to love others every day. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

¹ Stott, John, (2006). Through the Bible Through the Year Daily Reflections from Genesis to Revelation, Oxford: Lion Hudson plc. p.232.

Day 39 (GOOD FRIDAY 14 April)

Title: **Who killed Jesus?**

Bible Reading: John 18:1 – 19:42

Key Verse: Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.” (John 19:11)

Devotional Commentary :

Humanly speaking, those responsible for Jesus’ death included Judas, the Jewish priests and leaders, Pilate, the crowd, and the soldiers. They were all responsible. Before condemning their sinful motives and moral weaknesses, we need to pause and ask ourselves: Are we guilty of similar sins today in our own way?

But we know it was the divine plan of our Father God that Jesus was born to die for us—for our salvation through repentance and faith. Romans 8:32 explains, “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all ...” God had demonstrated His supreme love and kindness towards us. It is crucial to note that Jesus Himself said, “No one takes it (my life) from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” (John 10:18).

This combination of human and divine aspects of Jesus’ death is expounded in Acts 2:23: “This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.” The Apostle Peter rightly attributed our Lord’s crucifixion both to God’s purpose and men’s wickedness. The cross bears witness to God’s love and human sin, and also to God’s justice, mercy and grace in and through Christ.

Over to you :

What about our part in sending Jesus Christ to the cross? Have we seriously confronted our own sins? Have we fully and honestly in repentance asked God’s forgiveness for the cleansing of our sins? Let us seek God’s help daily to turn away from evil.

Prayer:

Lord, as I recall today Your love and Jesus' immense sacrifice for me, have mercy on me. Help me to live as Your child and serve You in a worthy manner. Amen.

Day 40 (HOLY SATURDAY 15 April)

Title: **All is Ended, or Is It?**

Bible Reading: Mathew 27:57-66

Key Verse: " ... we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.'" Matthew 27:63

Devotional Commentary :

It was all over. All hope gone! Jesus the Rabbi, the Friend, the Teacher, the Messiah had died. Nothing was left!

But there were those who did not give up. Joseph of Arimathea was resolved to give Jesus a proper burial, apparently in the tomb he had prepared for himself. And there was Nicodemus who came along and helped. (John 19:39) Clearly, they were willing to risk everything to honour Jesus. Also the women hung on, hoping against hope that some miracle might happen, but Jesus' disciples had fled and disappeared.

Then there were the chief priests and the Pharisees. They were still not satisfied; they could not rest. They had to make sure that this 'deceiver' must not be given any chance at challenging them again,--ever! So they had the tomb sealed.

Will there be any more hope? The dawn has yet to come.

Over to you :

What struggles do you face today? Over the past few weeks, as you worked through this series of devotional meditations, on what things have you been placing your hope? What has sustained you in the hours of darkness? Who has been there to grant you courage and strength to press on?

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, into the dark world You came as a child in Bethlehem. When sin reigned supreme and evil appeared to have triumphed, You broke the power of Satan, sin and death, --by Your perfect obedience and sacrifice, by Your death on the cross, and You rose victorious on Easter morning. When the night is darkest, when all around has failed, help me to remember that You are my Risen Saviour and Ever-living God and King. I love You, Lord. I worship You, Lord. Amen.

EASTER SUNDAY

Bible Reading: John 20:1-18



Photograph Courtesy of Dr. Samuel Ong

ABOUT – Writers, Photographer and Editors:

GRACE MOO worships at Trinity Methodist Church Penang. After graduating with a Master of Divinity from the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary, she serves in Christian music ministries, teaches piano, and aspires to write for the edification of the Malaysian Church. She has contributed many reflective writings in the past Advent and Lent Meditations and her works can be found on the TRAC website. She resides in Penang with her husband, Ben, and their daughter, Sophie.

SHEARN SYA has been in the pastoral ministry for 5 years, after completing his M.Div from Seminari Theoloji Malaysia. He currently pastors Wesley Methodist Church, Johor Bahru and Nusajaya Methodist Church. He enjoys drinking Coke Light and Coke Zero (both of which contain no sugar and use artificial sweeteners that aren't worse than sugar). In a constant effort to keep his waistline below his age, he is typically on a no-carb diet, strictly avoiding rice, bread, noodles, pastry, and all manners of sweets and desserts. His hope is for every Christ-follower to be a Word-reader, in harmony with John 1:1.

SAMUEL ONG (Photographer) is a servant of God, a family person and a doctor of hearts, both physical and spiritual. Blessed with many talents by God's amazing grace, he is active in many different arenas of life. He has a passion for young people, the All Blacks and hymns, and now, he is active in photography, capturing God's creative wonders. He served as Trinity Annual Conference Lay Leader from 2007-2012 and established Whispering Hope. He is married to Loo Ling and they have three lovely daughters (Ming, Xian and En).

DANIEL ONG is a retired corporate lawyer. He worships and participates in the life of Christ Methodist Church, Ampang. He enjoys reading and plucking on his Martin and Taylor guitars. His music taste ranges from J.S. Bach to James Taylor. His main ministry interests are worship and liturgy, and that which concerns spiritual growth and formation issues. To him, worship is formative and can revitalise people's lives - in worship we are reminded of who we are and what, by God's grace, we are becoming.

SIEH LEE MEI LING worships and serves at Wesley Kuala Lumpur. A regular organist and occasional choir director, she believes in living out her faith as much as being led and empowered by the Spirit of God and Jesus Christ in whatever capacity called into. This applies to her family and church life, her professional career and to society at large. She continues to help those needing assistance whenever possible despite her own limitations, for His glory.

PEGGY SEOW is passionate about Christians being spiritually formed, especially through Prayer Retreats and Spiritual Direction. She is a TRAC Minister and an adjunct lecturer with STM (Seminari Theoloji Malaysia), teaching first year students "Christian Spirituality".

HWA JEN & TSYH YONG (Editors) strive to work as a team in their labour of love, as they edited these devotional notes, often pushing each other to the limit. It has been both a challenge and a joy to engage their hearts and minds, their pastoral experience and theological understanding, so that the Scriptures and the notes may become alive to our readers. (They worship in Penang Wesley, most times.)