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PROGRAM
Year A

**God is on
the journey,
too**

Christopher J Monaghan CP

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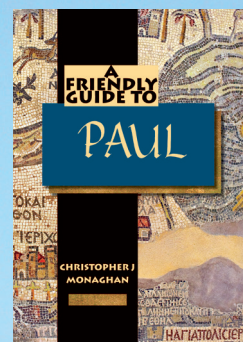
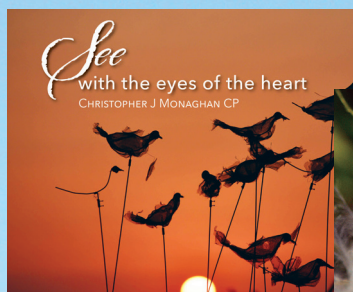
THE EASTER TRIDUUM 31

About the author

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See with the Eyes of the Heart, and *A Friendly Guide to Paul*. This Lenten resource combines his love of the Scriptures, our rich spiritual tradition, and the beauty of the creation that enfolds us.



INTRODUCTION

Pope Francis has spoken of Lent as 'A new beginning, a path leading to the certain goal of Easter, Christ's victory over death'. Lent is a precious opportunity for us, individually and communally, to stop and reflect. Here we can consider the opportunities, and challenges that face us. Lent asks us to open our lives and hearts once again to God. Growth, transformation and deeper faith are offered: will we accept?

In some ways, we know that we have been here before – yet time and life stand still for no one. Our personal challenges and frailties are still our well-known companions, but each year Lent brings new opportunities to take a few more steps on the path to holiness, to the deep peace God wants for us. For some, Lent has associations with feelings of inadequacy: we are confronted with the fact that we are not yet all we are called to be.

There is no doubt that Lent calls us to some solid soul-searching, but we are not alone. We can take comfort in the words of Teresa of Avila that as we walk along the path before us there is no need to be discouraged because 'The feeling remains that God is on the journey, too'.

On Lent's annual pilgrimage, the lectionary provides readings that nourish us – and challenge us – as we walk with Jesus to Jerusalem; to his passion, death and resurrection. Every year the scriptures give us a wealth of prompts for our reflections, prayers, and discussions. As we begin this journey the sage words of Francis de Sales come to mind:

'Have patience in all things, but, first of all with yourself.'

INTRODUCTION

OLD TESTAMENT PASSAGES

On the first Sunday of Lent, we begin our journey in Genesis 2:7–9, 3:1–7, when God, in an intimately caring and tender moment, breathes life into humanity. Fashioned by God, the first couple then seek the knowledge of good and evil. In this action they do in fact become like God, but this knowledge comes at a catastrophic cost, and reveals their ultimate spiritual and physical vulnerability. The result is the spread of violence and the rupture of relationships in the human family that we see in the first chapters of Genesis.

But God does not give up on humanity. On the second Sunday of Lent we read in Genesis 12:1–4 of Abram and Sarah, who are given a mission: they will begin a journey of discovery with the promise of future blessings extending to all the peoples of the earth. By the third Sunday, our focus shifts to centuries later in Exodus 17:3–7, when the people of Israel are in the desert, complaining about their predicament. God responds by empowering Moses to provide water to sustain them and so continue the journey. In the face of their questioning whether God is with them or not, God once more demonstrates care for a people who doubt and question that care.

The fourth Sunday of Lent jumps ahead to a further stage in Israel's growth as a nation when Samuel anoints David as king (1 Samuel 16:1,6–7,10–13). Here we are shown that God does not see and judge a person's

worth as we do – a lesson with which all times and cultures wrestle. The fifth Sunday of Lent (Ezekiel 37:12–14) shows how the Christian proclamation of the resurrection is already prefigured in Ezekiel's prophecy of God's ability to raise up Israel from despair and loss in the midst of their own experience of loss, dislocation and despair.

These beautiful readings provide us with glimpses into Israel's experience, and ours too. At every stage of the journey of faith there are things to learn, invitations to grow, and opportunities for our relationships with God and others to be strengthened, healed, and renewed.

NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGES

The Pauline readings for this Lent draw predominantly from the letter to the Romans in which Paul reflects on the frailty of human experience, but from a standpoint of great hope, thanksgiving, and wonder for God's gracious care. The reading for the first Sunday (Romans 5:12,17–19) reminds us that what had been lost by the first Adam has been more than regained in Jesus' death and resurrection. It is a free gift that restores our wounded humanity so that we can begin anew. The reading from 2 Timothy 1:8–10 on the second Sunday beautifully reminds us that this gift was always in God's mind and heart for us. On the third Sunday, the reading from Romans 5:1–2, 5–8 builds on this understanding, reflecting on the utter graciousness of Jesus' love dying for us while we were yet sinners.

This act of love is the foundation stone of our Christian hope, a hope that is not deceptive. The fourth Sunday (Ephesians 5:8–14) calls us to respond to the gift we have received by not only coming into the light but being transformed into light ourselves. It is a call to wake from sleep and discover what our loving God wants of us not just as recipients of God's love, but as active participants in the ongoing mission of Jesus. The reading for the fifth Sunday returns to Romans (Romans 8:8–11) and reminds us that we can confidently participate in that mission because the spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is living in us, and will give life to our bodies too.

GOSPEL PASSAGES

The first Sunday of Lent's gospel reading traditionally focuses on Jesus' time of trial in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11). It was a time of discernment and prayer that served to clarify his sense of mission, joining his journey with that of Israel in the wilderness, and also with our journey as disciples. The Transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:1–9) on the second Sunday prepares the disciples for the long journey ahead with its glimpse of future glory, and warns them of the danger of standing still and building tents when they should be taking the first steps on the road to Jerusalem.

The third, fourth and fifth Sundays shift our focus from Matthew's Gospel to John's Gospel. They invite us to reflect on a number of powerful

transforming encounters and conversations. Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman by the well on the third Sunday (John 4:5–42) will not only create a safe space for the woman to confront her past, but opens a pathway to new life for her and for others, who will see for themselves that Jesus provides the living water they long for. The conversation of Jesus with the man born blind on the fourth Sunday (John 9:1–41) invites us to leave our spiritual blindness behind and recognise who and what God is offering us in the person of Jesus. Jesus' conversations with Martha and Mary after the death of Lazarus on the fifth Sunday (John 9:1, 6–9, 13–17, 34–38) bring us to the last and greatest of Jesus' signs in the first half of the Gospel. In the face of grief and death, Martha and Mary's belief in Jesus as the Son of God powerfully challenges the faith of believers in every age as we wrestle with the same reality.

WISDOM OLD AND NEW

In addition to the scriptural readings there are a number of quotes taken from saints both ancient and modern, as well as from some contemporary sources of wisdom. These have been chosen because they shed their own light on this time of grace, acting as trustworthy and wise guides for the journey that lies ahead. It is a journey that we will make many times during our lives, and that we share with many who have gone before us.

The road beckons: let us take it with hope in our hearts confident that the one who begins this good work in us will bring it to completion.



Opening Prayer

Loving God,
as we begin this Lenten journey
we pray for open hearts and minds so
that we can use this precious time to
grow in discipleship as we accompany
Jesus on the road to Jerusalem.

As companions on the journey,
may we nurture each other by
compassionate and attentive listening
and by carrying each other's burdens
where we can.

May we journey with hope-filled hearts,
knowing that we are not alone,
for you are always with us.

Amen.

First Sunday of Lent

There are four things Christ wants us to know: first of all, that he is the ground and source of all our life and being. Second, he is with us in mercy and strength even as we do wrong, even as we are surrounded by enemies that we have enabled through our own foolish actions. Thirdly, he gently and lovingly draws us to understand how we went astray. Fourthly, that despite all, he remains steadfastly on our side, willing us to turn to him and love him as much as he loves us.

Julian of Norwich

First Sunday of Lent

GENESIS 2:7-9

Yahweh God shaped man from the soil of the ground and blew the breath of life into his nostrils, and man became a living being.

Yahweh God planted a garden in Eden, which is in the east, and there he put the man he had fashioned. From the soil, Yahweh God caused to grow every kind of tree, enticing to look at and good to eat, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The two biblical accounts of the creation of humanity might diverge in terms of whether we are created at the beginning or end of the process of creation; but where they converge is in their depiction of the loving and intimate relationship God has with us who have been created in God's image. God first shapes the creature of the earth and breathes life into it and then places humanity in the garden where all that is needed to sustain life is present in all its complexity, fruitfulness and wonder. What is lacking is a partner, and God sets out to address this, culminating in the creation of woman.

The contrast with the Babylonian creation story, the *Enuma Elish*, couldn't be more striking. In that tradition humanity is fashioned by the high god Marduk using the blood of gods who have rebelled against him. Humanity is created out of conflict, and our only purpose is to serve the gods and make their life easier. In Genesis 2 the first couple are not slaves – they are entrusted with the task of stewarding the garden, with the only proviso being that

they avoid eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

As the story unfolds, the first couple will be enticed to seek to be like God and transcend the boundaries that God has set for them. The warning to be careful of what you ask for is a timely reminder that sometimes our wishes might be answered, but in ways that disconcert us, and with consequences we did not expect. The first two humans do indeed gather some partial knowledge of good and evil but as yet they have only discovered shame and their nakedness. This archetypal and mythological language communicates profound truths about the human experience – that we are created by and for God, and yet to be in relationship with each other can cause us to lose our bearings and damage those very relationships.

ROMANS 5:15-16

There is no comparison between the free gift and the offence. If death came to many through the offence of one man, how much greater an effect the grace of God has had, coming to so many and so plentifully as a free gift through the one man Jesus Christ! Again, there is no comparison between the gift and the offence of one man. One single offence brought condemnation, but now, after many offences, have come the free gift and so acquittal!

Many centuries after the book of Genesis was written, Paul reflected on the human condition: how, despite our frailties and failures, God never abandoned us or left us to our own devices. The death

**Ponder the fact that God
has made you a gardener,
to root out vice
and plant virtue.**

St Catherine of Siena

First Sunday of Lent

and resurrection of Jesus provided all humanity with the opportunity to start afresh – a new creation had begun for those with eyes to see, and hearts open to respond. It wasn't simply like resetting a clock or restarting a computer in order to go back to where you were, because something uniquely gracious had occurred in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. By this extraordinary gift, humanity has been washed, cleaned and renewed. Now a pathway to healing wounded relationships with God and each other has been opened up. The first couple learned about shame; now all humanity is invited to learn about infinite love and mercy.

MATTHEW 4:1-2

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the desert to be put to the test by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, after which he was hungry.

If the first couple sought to become like God, then Jesus shows the other side of the coin by revealing what humanity—renewed and in right relationship with God—looks like. When Jesus came to him for baptism, John was shocked and said how Jesus should be the one baptising him. Jesus responded by saying that this was no cause for concern since he was called to fulfill all righteousness. The theme of being in *right relationship* is one of the core themes of the Gospel of Matthew, and it is fitting that in the temptation scene Jesus will reveal exactly what this demands for his own life and mission.

In Mark's Gospel, while Jesus is in the wilderness he is ministered to by angels. This is in stark contrast to Matthew, where Jesus does not receive assistance until after he has completed his time of trial and preparation in the desert. Like us, Jesus has to face his own demons. Written for a community steeped in Israel's traditions, Matthew's gospel portrays Jesus as responding to every challenge with words from the book of Deuteronomy (8:3; 6:16 and 6:13). Whereas the people of Israel lost their way in their desert wanderings, Jesus reveals his integrity and the depth of his relationship with God and commitment to God's saving plan.

The first challenge he receives is to nourish himself; he responds by proclaiming that God is the source of his life. His mission will be to nourish the multitudes (Matt 14:14-31; 15; 32-39), and give his life that we might live. The second temptation urges him to put God to the test in order to protect himself from death. Once again, Jesus refuses this challenge, since his mission is to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28). The last temptation is to grasp for power: his integrity is revealed once more as he declares his role as one who serves. This theme will be sounded later in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus is described as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53:4 who carries our sicknesses and burdens for us (Matt 8:17).

Lent provides us with the opportunity to recalibrate our moral and spiritual compass, to reset our hearts secure in the knowledge of God's infinite and tender care for us. It is a time to let God once again breathe life into our hearts and lives to fashion us, heal our wounds, and bring us home to our deepest selves.



First Sunday of Lent

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The discussion questions pick up themes in the readings for the Sundays of Lent and are offered as a guide for your own reflection and sharing. Each of us brings our own experience and wisdom. For that reason, you are encouraged to listen to the wisdom of others. There are precious reflections that come from wrestling with the text, and from perceiving God's Word woven into the tapestry of our lives. Where we are standing is holy ground (Exod 3:5) so we invite you to be gentle with yourself and others as you share your own reflections, questions and learnings.

1. Paul stresses the impact of the choices and actions of Adam and Jesus. What choices and actions are you being invited to in Lent?
2. Jesus' time of testing in the wilderness is a moment of clarification and commitment. He is tested in regard to his use of power, whether he will seek to preserve himself, and whether he will nourish himself or others. How is Lent challenging you this year?

3. The first reading brings to light the intimate care that God takes in fashioning each one of us. How is God fashioning and creating you this Lent?
4. What do you consider to be the most important dimensions of being in right relationship?

PRAYER

- ✠ Loving God,
In the garden of our lives, weeds and wheat grow side by side. As we enter into the season of renewal, keep breathing your life into our hearts, shaping us so that we can become the new creation you call us to be. Open our hearts that we may listen to your call and let go of attitudes and behaviour that do not allow us to grow in love and service. Amen.

We plant seeds that will flower as results in our lives, so best to remove the weeds of anger, avarice, envy and doubt, that peace and abundance may manifest for all.

Dorothy Day

