



LENTEN
PROGRAM
Year C

Restoring freshness in the time of Lent



Michael Elligate

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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He takes a great interest in the worlds of biblical study and secular literature particularly in applying this scholarship to the pastoral application in preaching. He is a graduate in Social Sciences and Education from La Trobe University.

In 2014, Michael was appointed to Member of the Order of Australia 'for significant service to the Catholic Church in Australia, to the promotion of ethics in research and to the community'.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our program designed to refresh and renew us in the time of Lent.

The Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, expressed the triumph of fresh beginnings in the midst of our broken humanity in his wonderful poem 'God's Grandeur'.

He laments that destructive inclination embedded in ourselves when he writes:

Generations have trod, have trod,
have trod

And all is seared with trade;
Bleared, smeared with toil;
And for all this, nature is never
spent ...

There lives the dearest freshness
deep down things

The source to this dynamic restorative
freshness is the warm eternal presence
of our creator God

Because the Holy Ghost
Over the bent world broods with
warm breast and ah! Bright wings

The biblical reference to the mother
hen who protects her young
ones during seasons of chaos and
disruption proclaims that as creation
is constantly renewed in its freshness,
the people of the earth may also find
a new intimacy with their God.

We would hope that through
the prayerful attention we give to
the ancient Jewish psalms, and then
reading the gospels for the Sundays
of Lent, we will be touched by a new
freshness in our own lives.

Sr. Veronica Brady IBVM
challenged her youthful students at
teachers college many years ago with
these words:

The debate is not about the
argument for a flat or round earth,
but ... how we bring a quality of
life and color to today's world.

*Christ Teacher's College
Oakleigh 1973*

Opening Prayer

**Lord Jesus,
In the seasons of life we encounter
the birth of a child
and at other times the death
of someone we love.
Yet birth and death happens every day.
Only bonding with this baby
or the deceased person
takes us from a sensitive acknowledgement
to a much deeper response
in joy or in hope.
Through these times together
may we be moved in faith
to reach some depth of appreciation
for your constant love offered to us.
Amen**

INTRODUCTION



We will pray some Lenten psalms each week that will put us in a reflective mood to open ourselves to the Sunday gospels. The psalms are part of the treasury for Jewish prayer and were readily made part of Christian worship, particularly at the celebration of the Eucharist. The psalms were recited in the homes of people celebrating the feast of Passover and at other times of Jewish table worship. They express emotions such as happiness, penance and praise. During the season of Lent the Church constantly draws upon this prayerful resource to express the hopes of the season.



The Season of Lent emerged gradually in the life of the Christian Church.

By the fourth century the period was set at forty days.

In the beginning, each Sunday was celebrated as a resurrection day.

This certainly marked this holy day as separate from the Jewish Sabbath.

In more recent years we have returned to the early custom where adult candidates for baptism are given their final instructions during lent, and then received into the community with baptism at the Easter Vigil Mass.

Another early custom has been restored. The idea is that as we renew

our lives, those in need are given help. Across Australia in the time of Lent people are invited to participate in Caritas' 'Project Compassion'.

A few things to consider as we approach Lent this year.



WORD ON THE STREET!

No one could have predicted that our lives would be thrown into such a mess by the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic across our world. Then its frightening grip on our own hospitals, aged-care facilities, our homes and our schools. 'Lockdown' is now a dreaded word. We found the distance we were permitted to travel became increasingly small and overnight curfews were put in place. Shopkeepers were devastated;

businesses had no option but to shut down.

Even our churches were shut only opened for very small weddings and funerals.

During this new season of Lent, we carry a sense of brokenness and frailty.

We gather with hope, even as we know our lives have been so knocked around.



INTRODUCTION

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

We also need to acknowledge the restlessness in the Church today.

There is a saying that needs to be repeated often and that is that the Church must be constantly be refreshed and reformed. It is in this spirit of honesty and hope that we are prepared to recognise some real matters that are on people's minds today about our Churches.

Churches in recent decades have lost that tight tribal feel that once offered a secure defensive sense of belonging. In many places attendance at Sunday Mass has gone into a dramatic free fall. Many people feel a strong dissatisfaction with unhelpful preaching that is pious and uninformed. Often people say that the realities of their lives are ignored and that the old threats that engendered

fear and guilt are still present. Then the scandals documented by The Royal Commission into Sexual Abuse in Religious Institutions, have led to hurt and bitterness among many struggling people of faith. Often the authority figures in today's Church have been called out as cruel, dishonest and dismissive. The culture that characterises the changing expectations of women is so often adjudged as being misguided and plain nonsense. Many people take heart in the social justice initiatives sponsored our Churches. Yet it is often remarked, that beyond the generous contributions from the rank-and-file local parishioners, the substantial investments and resources of the institutional church remain untouched.

The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explicating some things in view of the situation of their churches, and preserving the form of proclamation, but always in such a fashion that told the honest truth about Jesus.

Dei Verbum

PREPARATION FOR THE GATHERING AND SCRIPTURE DISCUSSION

Try to read the Sunday Gospel and the background notes before the meeting.

1. Opening prayer together.
2. a member of the group reads the statement at the beginning of the Sunday format.
3. The psalm that is read before each particular Sunday Gospel could be read slowly by the group.
4. The Gospel may be read by one person or by allocating parts to people in the group.
5. A quiet time to reflect before sharing.
6. A group member invites the participants to respond to any of the questions.
7. After the responses and sharing the group concludes with the closing prayer.



How the Gospels emerged in the early Faith Communities

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

We would do well to see how the gospels were born out of troubled times.

Within twenty years of Christian communities being established by people like St Paul, his encouraging letters were not meeting all the needs of early converts to the way of Jesus.

Enter the one we call Mark!

Mark invented a new literary format that came to be called a Gospel. Mark's genius was to move from the established form of instructional letters to writing a narrative that told a series of stories about Jesus.

In these stories the values of Jesus were proclaimed, and they contained a strong invitation to enter into a friendship with the Lord who was proclaimed as crucified and risen.

Mark identifies the present moment in his early faith community where people are troubled.

Eager converts to the way of Jesus are seen as being

tired in their struggle to believe, as they tried to live a new kind of life in the Lord.

The Jesus that Mark presents in his Gospel is vulnerable and eventually crushed by the people who oppose him. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane is reduced to being a broken man.

He is in a mess, and wonders if he can go on to face a trial that will inevitably lead to crucifixion.

In Mark's Gospel Jesus is abandoned and dies alone as a deserted prophet.

Mark highlights that the feelings of his struggling community, some forty years after the passion of Jesus, are precisely comparable to the experience that Jesus himself journeyed through, as he struggled to be faithful to the way of his God.


So the Gospel of Mark builds up morale in his own desperate community by proclaiming that this was the very struggle that had faced Jesus himself, only a few

decades before. The next generation of believers has to be reminded that fulfillment will only be found by being a people of service for others

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Obviously other struggling faith communities have other burning issues to face. Enter another gospel – the one that we attribute to Matthew. Matthew presents Jesus as the new prophet, who teaches with authority and is raised in the ancient Jewish religious tradition. Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses who prays the psalms, and is immersed in the rich cycle of Jewish religious life. Matthew's Jesus assures the Jewish converts that they must bring their religious treasures of the Temple and the Synagogue with them to the house churches and faith communities that now follow the way of Jesus.

Now The Law and the Prophets will be revered in the



gatherings of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

Matthew's community is given guidance by seeing Jesus as the New Wisdom who speaks with the deep authority that was once given to the leaders of the Jewish people. Members of this community pray over religious meals that bring hope and healing to this renewed people of God.

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

By contrast Luke writes a Gospel for the needs in particular of the outsider. This was a burning issue in some communities of faith, as Gentile people were not aware of the rich Jewish tradition.

Luke constructs a Gospel that builds wide bridges for the newcomers as they settle into the way of Jesus. This sense of inclusion and welcome is particularly highlighted by a series of meals that are placed as moments of welcome to the table of the followers of Jesus.

Luke's Gospel presents Jesus as making strong connections with many people living on the margins of society. This Gospel brings hope and a strong sense of belonging to those who feel that they are strangers and are now included in the community of converts to the way of the Nazarene.

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Finally the followers of Jesus produced a very different gospel that came to be called John's Gospel.

This Gospel presents a grand proclamation with Jesus recognised as the Eternal Son of God being shaped in human flesh, and who has lived amongst us. The writer or writers of John's Gospel are certainly artists and poets. The opening of this Gospel is given a Prologue or a grand overview that links the origin of the cosmos, where the movement of Eternal Light comes into the world to dispel

darkness. The Eternal God sends the Son amongst us who in turn enacts a series of signs that bring Eternal Life to all who follow Jesus. John's stories or narratives may not be as historically grounded as some events recorded in the synoptic gospels, but the rich imagery and dramatic dialogue invites the searching believer to share in the fullness of life offered through Jesus.

Take the story of The Wedding Feast at Cana in Galilee. The event account may not be an historical event as such. Often it is remembered as the day the wine ran out at a wedding celebration.

Many scholars see the account as a Eucharistic proclamation. Jesus in his glory offers us strong and wise sustenance by providing us with the cup of wine that meets our deepest thirst and brings us to Eternal Life.

*Background photo:
Sea of Galilee*

WEEK ONE

Under the hammer

People used to talk about
'falling into sin'.

When we truly sin, it really
is not an accident, but a
deliberate action.

We have to know deep down
that this is a deliberate option
to turn away from God's loving
presence in our lives.

We need to constantly
take time out,
to step back from a frenetic
pace of life, and quietly
examine the quality
of our lives.



Psalm 91 (refer to lectionary)

Gospel: Luke 4:1-13

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit through the wilderness, being tempted there by the devil for forty days. During that time he ate nothing and at the end he was hungry. Then the devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to turn into a loaf.' But Jesus replied, 'Scripture says:

Man does not live on bread alone.'

Then leading him to a height, the devil showed him in a moment of time all the kingdoms of the world and said to him, 'I will give you all this power and the glory of these kingdoms, for it has been committed to me and I give it to anyone I choose. Worship me, then, and it shall all be yours.' But Jesus answered him, 'Scripture says:

You must worship the Lord your God, and serve him alone.'

Then he led him to Jerusalem and made him stand on the parapet of the Temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said to him 'throw yourself down from here, for scripture says:

He will put his angels in charge of you to guard you, and again:

They will hold you up on their hands in case you hurt your foot against a stone.'

But Jesus answered him, 'It has been said:

You must not put the Lord your God to the test.'

Having exhausted all these ways of tempting him, the devil left him, to return at the appointed time.

The first three Gospels share so much in common, as they are heavily influenced by Mark's first gospel. These gospels are often called the synoptic gospels as they share many images and stories.

So the three Synoptic Gospels state that after Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, he leaves behind John the Baptist and his followers, and retreats into the desert wilderness for a period of isolation.

It is here that Jesus has time to reflect and discern what he

must do as he feels the call of his God to proclaim a way of living and loving. Notice that the agenda for Jesus' commitment and action is not entirely worked out, as Jesus rejoins the Baptist and his followers for some time before he sets out on his own mission. Some modern-day scholars suggest that a helpful way to understand the temptations that the devil figure presents to Jesus is to see them as a dream sequence.

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you wisely sought some silence and quiet reflective time in your public life.

As we pause to recognise the special time of Lent,

May we be honest with ourselves and be open to being inspired once again by your Holy Spirit.

Amen!

In Jewish tradition the number 40 often indicated a sacred time.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses leads the people wandering in the wilderness for forty years. This was seen as a time of testing and punishment for the people of God.

WEEK ONE

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Perhaps we could name moments in life when we have been under pressure, and we have tried to steady ourselves. Maybe we tried to find a quiet place, so we could sort things out?
2. Often we say to a trusted friend 'Come for a walk', when what we are really saying is: 'Could you help me work out a difficult decision I have to make?'. Maybe this is my experience?
3. In the Gospel of Luke it is mentioned that Jesus will be tempted later. Does that seem to be a reality for ourselves also?
4. In the Gospel of Luke Jesus calls for justice and support for the poor. Can this be seen as a Lenten action?



Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you were guided by The Spirit to take time out from the noise and many demands in life.

In the silence of the desert wilderness, you searched and struggled to discern what was to be the will of the Father. You were given this decisive time to see what it means to be faithful.

We pray now for the wisdom and honesty to be faithful followers of your way. We pray during this Lenten stillness to be open to the promptings of your spirit, so that we too may share in your mission to bring hope and healing to our world.

Amen!