

The Gift Of Empty Hands

Reflections for Lent

A prayer resource for each week of Lent, centred around the nine fruits of the Spirit from Galatians 5.

Jesus' death on the cross, and the gift of the Spirit with his dying breath, sets us free to receive these gifts of God. Each of the fruits counteracts a characteristic fearful habit in our hearts, and we can steer against each fear in order to prepare for the Spirit's grace and fruit. We let go in order to have hands empty enough to receive God's gift. Each week will offer a reflection on one of the fruits of the Spirit. There will be a suggestion to ponder and something to do each week.



The first and last of the fruits are **love** and **self-control**. We might begin Lent thinking we have to make a big effort, pushing ourselves and pushing God. That might signal that we are still unfree: when we love God and our neighbour freely, there is no need to push. And we can't force ourselves to love more. If I feel I don't love enough, what I need is to feel more secure in God's love for me: I can't give what I haven't got.

So if you're beginning Lent wanting to work more on loving, it's good to spend time in God's presence just soaking up his love for you. Perhaps you might use a scripture verse such as Isaiah 46.4: 'Even to your old age I am he, even when you turn grey I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.' God's Spirit will breathe love into your heart, if you can soften the barriers of fear, anxiety or envy that keep God out. Then that love will flow out to others without your having to make a big effort.

Self-control doesn't have to mean gritted teeth. It makes a difference whether you are *drawn* or *driven* to do something. If you're in training for a sports event, you let go the comfy evening in front of the TV in favour of some gym time: but because you are drawn by the hope of better fitness, it doesn't feel like a big sacrifice. How could you make Lent something that draws you rather than drives you? The self-control, the 'giving up', will come naturally then, as you sit more lightly to things that would get in the way of loving God.

Ash Wednesday to Lent 1

In these first days of Lent we are invited to pray for **joy**, the joy that comes from the 'perfect love that casts out fear'. Joy fills us with energy, and doing the right thing just flows effortlessly. The sin of sloth, whether inner not-caring or outer inertia, grows less in us. We can practise for this by moving against our own negativity and reaching out to others. Doing the right thing, acting with justice and in accordance with God's will, can be a way of *fostering* joy, forming the conditions in our hearts that make ready for the Spirit's free gift. There may be a tincture of self in there as well (we want to feel good about ourselves); that's OK, we're still growing in grace. But if we've acted in accordance with what God asks of us, then when we reflect on what we've done, we will experience a sense of satisfaction, if not more than that.

We can't always command our feelings: but a good conscience is a starting-point for being open to receive the joy that comes we know not how or when. God can and will surprise us, and our hearts will catch fire.

Letting go and letting God can sometimes entail turning our attention elsewhere until God's effortless presence brings about what we were hoping for. We don't need to push the river of grace: as we grow in trust, we learn to relax into God's loving care.

Prayer

My God, when I plod joylessly, surprise me and lift my heart with the joy of your presence. And may I share what I have been given. Amen.

Jesus says: 'Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.' (Luke 10.20)

What could make this more real to you, so that you truly rejoice?

Action

Give someone a little treat. Pick yourself some flowers.



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Lent 1

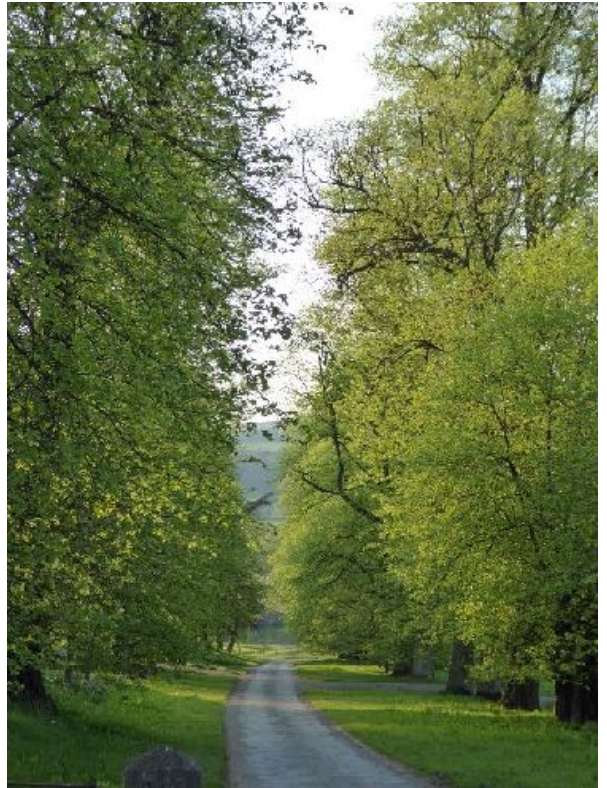
This week we will focus on praying for **peace** in our hearts. This fruit of the Spirit carries with it an experience of serenity: firmly grounded in God, we can't be knocked off balance by the stuff life throws at us. Anger loosens its grip on us. We can practise for receiving the peace of God in our hearts with exercises that promote that serenity: it might be deep breathing with a prayer word such as the Name of Jesus, or it might be a slow, meditative walk in the park or by the sea.

I can combine this with praying for God's grace, for the peace that passes all understanding. This is like setting the table and lighting the candles: the Guest comes in his own time, but I can signal that I am waiting and hoping for him to come. We can *foster* peace by steering against the anger which we all experience. We don't need to get angry with ourselves because we still get angry! But we can humbly practise steering against it, so we aren't hijacked by our worst nature. Grace will help us become our better selves.

There are things to let go of too, if we want to grow a sense of peace: switch off the electronic devices, stop multitasking, slow down, go to bed early.

Prayer

Faithful God, when I am drowning in inner noise, pour your peace into my heart. Amen.



Jesus says: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you... Do not let your hearts be troubled.' (John 14.27)

What do I need to let go of to make room for his peace in my heart? Do I need to receive something first?

Action

Spend 24 hours living peacefully. Choose actions that support inner quiet. Choose words and actions that build peace with those around you.

Lent 2

This week's fruit of the Spirit is **patience**. Not 'being a doormat': positive patience is a form of courage. Consider that fear is often what makes us impatient: we'd rather have a bad solution than no solution, for fear of what might happen instead. Active patience can mean working for better times, while trusting God that he will equip us at his own pace.

So when we want to *foster* patience in our hearts, it won't help to practise swallowing anything and everything people demand of us. Instead, practising courageous action and steering against the fear inside will make ready for the God-given gift of patience, being willing to wait on God's time.

Having the patience to work together with others for a compromise teaches us that other people are not a threat, but an enrichment of our lives. Patience, like love, 'bears all things, hopes all things': when we show patience to someone, we are trusting confidently in the perfected person God is leading them to be. Allowing the seed of patience to grow in us is one way of showing love to our neighbour.



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Jesus says, 'But as for [the seed] in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.' (Luke 8.15)

What makes me impatient? When do others need to be patient with me?

What challenges my courage most?

Prayer

Loving God, you are long-suffering and of great kindness. Have patience with me when I stumble and grow your patience in my heart. Amen.

Action

Spend some social time with someone you find challenging.

Lent 3

This week focuses on **kindness**. This fruit of the Spirit carries with it a renewal of our innocence, because when we extend to others the kindness God extends to us, we move away from the antagonism of Cain and Abel, and move towards the state of Paradise, of Adam and Eve before the Fall and of the renewed creation at the second coming of Christ. So when we want to receive the gift of kindness, we can practise for it by *fostering* the innocent purity that God still sees in us because we are made in the image of his Son, no matter how much we have spoiled that image. We can move away from using others for our own advantage. Jesus tells us that we need to become like children to enter the kingdom: so learning to respond to others in simplicity and trust will help us to develop our kindness. We can learn from Jesus, who was himself simple, direct, truthful and kind in his interactions with others.

When kindness is what we expect from others, it helps to draw out kindness from them, and it also trains us to be kind, turning our potential innocence into reality.



In the picture, the child is giving to the adult. I wonder how often we are blocked in our ability to receive kindness, because we don't expect it from this type of person? How might we ourselves grow in childlike spontaneity?

Jesus says, 'You always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish' (Mark 14.7)

What kindness will others experience from me this Lent?

What is the greatest kindness I received last month?

Prayer

God of kindness, make me a clean heart and a kind spirit, that I may be generous as you are generous. Amen.

Action

Give something or some time to someone who cannot repay you.

Lent 4

The fruit of the Spirit for this week is **goodness**. If Google is anything to go by, we use ‘goodness’ nowadays mostly in the context of food. But what is goodness in a person? Perhaps it’s that inner honesty and integrity that says ‘what you see is what you get’; and what you see is things like generosity that help other people to flourish; you don’t see meanness or deceit, which are fear-driven. As Jesus said of Nathanael in John 1.47: ‘here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’

Ask yourself: what person springs to mind when I think of goodness? Who is most Christlike among the people I know? The truthfulness and transparency that goes right to the foundation of the personality is God’s gift; but we can *foster* it by trying to be authentic in our dealings with others. We can use this Lent as an opportunity to *be* truly what we would like to be, and what the masks we use with other people present us as being, although we’re not entirely. Acting with authenticity is choosing to act as the person God would have us be, allowing his grace to work through us on his world. And authenticity and goodness point away from ourselves and towards God: ‘no-one is good but God alone.’ (Mark 10.18)



Prayer

O God, you are good and you love humankind. Let your goodness grow in me, as I seek to follow Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jesus says, ‘Every good tree bears good fruit’ (Matthew 7.17)

What do I need to ask for from God in order to be able to bear good fruit?

Where am I able to lay aside my mask?

Action

Choose someone you know in whom you see goodness. Talk to them about something important to both of you, and then reflect afterwards on how their goodness was shown in their responses. Notice how you are changed for the better by spending time with a good person.

Lent 5

This week the fruit of the Spirit to focus on is **faithfulness**. God's love is faithful, and unconditional commitment like his is his gift, when we are truly Christlike and our faithfulness comes from the deepest roots of our being. But we can *foster* faithfulness by practising constancy and sobriety in our actions, not always needing payback, shaping our character so as to be ready for faithfulness to root itself in our hearts. We learn to be steadfast and to bear things that might once have knocked us off our course. Jesus was faithful to his Father's will through suffering and death: we can learn to be more like him, by holding to what we chose during good times, even when times challenge us and demand hard choices.

The fear that is the opposite of constancy and sobriety shows itself as gluttony, wanting to have lots of pleasurable experiences, and dropping people who remind us of weakness or mortality. Faithfulness is willing to deal with the hard stuff, and trusts in God's own faithfulness to hold us through good and ill, through time and into eternity. Growing in faithfulness, we depend ever more on God.



image © Kimberly Sauer /Pinterest

The Pelican is a symbol of Christ's faithfulness and self-sacrifice, in these words from Richard Crashaw:

O soft self-wounding Pelican!
Whose breast weeps Balm for wounded man.
[...]
That blood, whose least drops sovereign be
To wash my worlds of sins from me.

Jesus says 'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.' (Luke 16.10)

When have I experienced God's faithfulness to me?

When have I been faithful to others against the odds?

Prayer

Faithful God, hold me in my dark hour, that I may keep faith with you. Amen.

Action

Get in touch with someone who has slipped off your radar.

Palm Sunday & Holy Week

The fruit of the Spirit for this week is **gentleness**. It's appropriate for Holy Week, when we think of the humility of Jesus Christ being willing to die for our sake, 'though he was in the form of God.' (Philippians 2.6) Humility is essential to develop gentleness, because in order to be gentle with others we have to be willing to let go of our pride and what we think we are entitled to.

We can *foster* real humility, which is not pretending we haven't got skills or qualities, by looking at ourselves 'with sober judgement' (Romans 12.3). Reminding ourselves that everything we have is gift, and we have often needed to ask for generosity and forgiveness from others, helps us to practise gentleness towards those who are feeling raw and hurt - which is most people at some time or other. Pride, which pushes others away, is rooted in fear: fear that others will discover the emptiness inside us. Humility requires courage, and a grateful heart. So spend time this week reflecting with gratitude on what a great thing Jesus has done for us in his dying and the resurrection life he offers us.



Prayer

Loving God, be gentle when I feel sore, and show me how to be gentle with those who need your love from me. Amen.

Jesus says 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.' (Matthew 11.29)

What do I need in order to practise gentleness towards others?

Do I allow others to be gentle to me?

Action

Do something for somebody that expresses tender care: a foot massage, brushing their hair.

If the person doesn't like to be touched, they may be glad for you to stroke their pet on their behalf.

Suggestions for group work

Icebreaker: in pairs, take a minute to look at the week's picture and then share your thoughts.

Discussion: look together at the main text discussing the fruit of the Spirit that is being focused on that week. The group leader may wish to prepare any Bible references.

Reporting back: in threes or fours, share your experience of doing the action suggested in the last week.

Bible reflection (pale green box): what does Jesus show you here of the way his kingdom is meant to be?

Where does the question in the box lead you?

Prayer: first share your experience of praying the prayer text in bold type, over the week. Then pray together.

Conclusion: Join together in praying the prayer offered for this week (bold type).

Prayers for Lent

**We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you,
because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.**

Almighty God,
by the prayer and discipline of Lent
may we enter into the mystery of Christ's sufferings,
and by following in his Way come to share in his glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:
give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit,
and, as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Almighty God,
whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain,
and entered not into glory before he was crucified:
mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross,
may find it none other than the way of life and peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

God of our journey,
as we walk with you on the path of obedience,
sustain us on our way and lead us to your glory,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

God our Father, we thank you
because you give us the spirit of discipline
that we may triumph over evil and grow in grace,
following our Redeemer who died for us,
Jesus Christ your blessed Son. Amen.

Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you;
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.

Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness;
through your gentleness we find comfort in fear.

Your warmth gives life to the dead,
your touch makes sinners righteous.

Lord Jesus, in your mercy heal us;
in your love and tenderness remake us.

In your compassion bring grace and forgiveness,
for the beauty of heaven may your love prepare us.

Amen.

O Lord and Master of my life,
give me not the spirit of laziness,
despair, lust of power, and idle talk.
But give rather the spirit of sobriety,
humility, patience and love to your servant.
Yes, O Lord and King,
grant me to see my own transgressions
and not to judge my neighbour,
for you are blessed forever. Amen.

St Ephrem the Syrian

**Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.**



live | pray | serve