

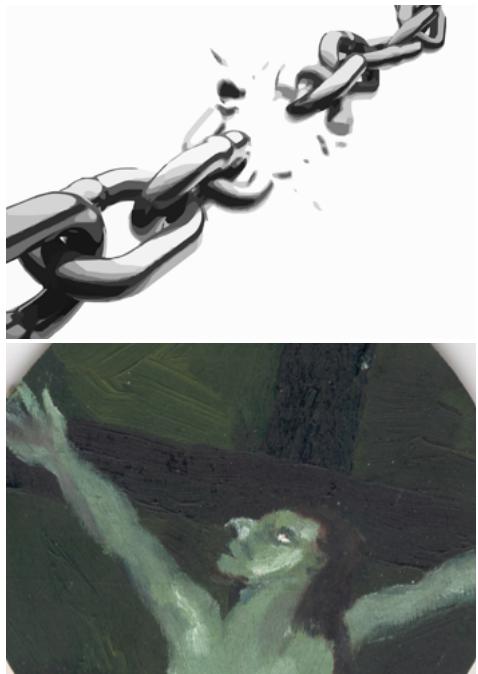
Redemption Songs

Reflections for Lent

A prayer resource for each week of Lent, centred around the fears that God delivers us from, and the love and acceptance that is shown by Jesus dying for our sakes.

Each week will offer a verse from the Psalms that you are invited to carry around with you in your daily life.

There will be a suggestion to ponder and something to do.



Jesus shows us by his life a way to live differently, and by his death what love and openness can cost us, in a world that works by the rules of power and success.

We can gain courage to live without reservations because we know he loves us without reservations.



Talking ‘sins’ can focus too tightly on one bad action. What about the attitude that underlies that action?

Each week will focus on one way of ‘living small’, shutting out other people and God.

Week 1 will take the lazy avoidance of God’s challenge and claim on our lives (traditionally called sloth). Week 2 will look at the attempt to cover up anxiety with short-term rewards (greed).

Week 3 will look at when desire is distorted by power games (lust). Week 4 will take the need for others to be less than oneself (envy).

Week 5 will look at anger, which imprisons us in bad experiences from the past. Week 6 will take the fear that there will not be enough (avarice).

Finally in Week 7 we will consider pride, when our own self is put in the place where God belongs.

Ash Wednesday to Lent 1

But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God.

I trust in the steadfast love of God for ever and ever. (Ps 52.8)

Many of us are imprisoned by old fears and anxieties that we are scarcely aware of. We have allowed our soul to contract around those fears to defend ourselves. And so we fail to reach the potential that God sees in each of us, because we are tugged back by those characteristic fears that lead us to fall into the same traps time and time again. We live small.

The most fundamental way of living small is to refuse to engage with the world: to put comfort above the risk of standing tall and growing into the person God wants you to be. But we can never shut out God's challenge altogether; small means dissatisfied. And so we are wide open for the next trap...

Reflect on the fact that God loves you and holds you fast. When a toddler is screaming and hitting out, you hold them gently but firmly, and they eventually calm down because they are held safely. That is how God treats us when we are snarled up in destructive behaviour - sin.



Prayer

My God, when I am deaf because I do not want to hear, challenge me. When I will do anything for a comfortable life, disturb me. When fear freezes me to the spot, warm my heart and help me to reach out to you and to others. Amen.

Jesus says: 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' (Luke 9.60)

What excuses do I like to make to God?

Action

Reach out to a person you wouldn't choose to relate to: speak to them, smile, or ask what is on their mind.

Practise being courageous in little ways.

Lent 1

Deliver me, O Lord, by your hand from those whose portion in life is unending, whose bellies you fill with your treasure. (Ps 17.14-15)

Wanting things can be a cover-up for anxiety that we don't want to acknowledge. If we were truly happy and at peace, we wouldn't need to chase short-term pleasures. The soul-contraction of greed leads us to trust other people, and God, less and less. 'No-one else cares for me so I'd better reward myself with treats,' is the hidden fear. But the habit of wanting is never-ending: we can't ever relax.

Maybe it's better to admit our anxiety to God and ourselves. God will show us what we really need, what we are really hungry for. Steering against the habit by letting go (time, money, things) can reveal that we spent a lot of energy servicing all this stuff. We can be free if we dare.

Reflect on the fact that God knows you need things to live. Still he says that if you put him first, you will see everything else in its right proportion, and learn the difference between 'want' and 'need'.

What you need most can't be bought anyway.



c Patrick Denker / wikipedia

Prayer

Faithful God, increase my trust in your love that will not let me go. Give me open hands and an attentive heart, that I may live now and not put it off to some future time.

Amen.

Jesus says: 'strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.' (Matthew 6.33)

What do I cling to? How could I loosen my grip?

Action

Give away something that you weren't going to get rid of anyway.

Give someone else a little treat.

Lent 2

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing upon earth
that I desire in comparison with you. (Ps 73.25)

Our relationships with people are often distorted by one person's desire to control, or another person's desire to play the child that needs looking after. Jesus never plays these sort of games, but relates to each person as an adult worthy of respect, even those whom the world shames or disrespects. The soul-contraction of lust is more about power than it is about true sharing. What choice did Bathsheba have when David decided he was going to get her? (2 Sam 11) We can be thankful that with God we are set free entirely from this kind of distorted relationship. We can be utterly straightforward with God; his love has no hidden agenda.

Prayer

God of love, purify my desire so that I may love freely and unconditionally, as you love me. Strengthen my desire so that I do not accept anything less than real love, out of fear that I am not worth any more.

Amen.



c OST Florida/ wikipedia

Jesus says to Mary Magdalen, 'Do not hold on to me.' (John 20.17)

How am I in relationships? Am I needy or controlling, distant or 'needing to be needed'?

Action

Have an honest conversation with someone you are close to.

Lent 3

Why look with envy, you towering mountains,
at the mount which God has desired for his dwelling,
the place where the Lord will dwell for ever? (Ps 68.15)

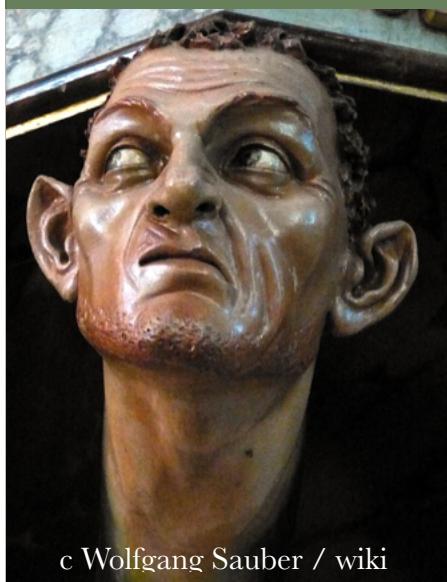
Envy has its root in a sense of personal inadequacy. If I feel strong and confident in myself, I don't worry that other people have things that I don't, either possessions or talents. If I rely on God, envy can have no power over me. But if I am envious, I contract my own soul into a habit of constantly comparing, neglecting the good things I do have because my eyes are fixed elsewhere. By contrast, a person who lives out of their deep-rooted love for God will draw others to themselves because of the warmth they radiate, even if they are not rich, talented or famous. The dissatisfaction of envy grows worse, the more you feed it: it's a recipe for permanent unhappiness.

Prayer

**God of freedom, unchain me from the
craving to have what others have. Teach my
heart to rejoice in having you. Amen.**

Reflect on the last time you felt envious. What does it tell you about the things that are important to you?

Are there things you are grateful not to have?



c Wolfgang Sauber / wiki

Jesus says, 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.' (Mark 7.20-23)

What defiles me?

Action

Count five things to be grateful for about today, and share one of them with another person.

Lent 4

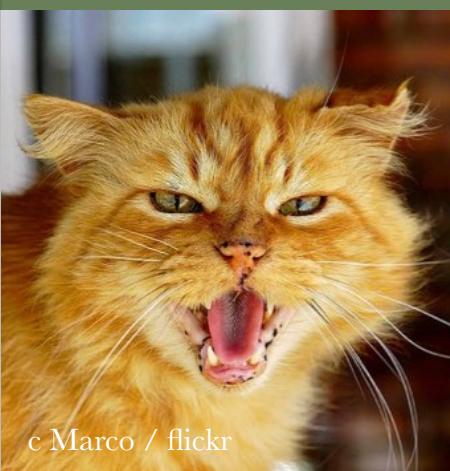
Refrain from anger and abandon wrath;
do not fret, lest you be moved to do evil. (Ps 37.8)

Anger in its right place can be constructive: it can make us get up and do something about injustice. It gives us the energy to tackle our failings and the laziness that can't be bothered to change. But anger can be destructive. It can be a sign of self-righteousness: I feel I am right (but is it really true?). Even justified anger can keep me imprisoned in the past. It's possible to work on patience and forgiveness, so that the habit of an angry knee-jerk reaction loosens its grip on us. The contraction of our soul opens up a little and we feel more free. If my hands are gripping tight on anger, I will have no capacity to open them to receive the love and tender kindness of God.

Prayer

Loving God, turn my anger into action for justice. Turn my hatred into forgiveness, and breathe your peace into my heart. Amen.

Do you explode, or do you brood in resentment: do you like your anger hot or cold? Reflect on the fact that God can absorb all your anger and see through to the pain beneath the violence. Talk to God about your angry thoughts and do not be afraid. Jesus died on the cross saying 'Father, forgive'.



c Marco / flickr

Jesus says, 'first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.' (Matthew 5.22-4)

Who needs forgiveness really, me or the other person?

If my anger is justified, I do not need to be pushed into false forgiveness when I am not ready. But I may choose to let go of my anger because I can see it is keeping me prisoner.

Action

Notice your own angry thoughts and forgive yourself for having them. If you can, go a step further and resolve to forgive the other person.

Lent 5

Some put their trust in chariots and some in horses,
but we will call only on the name of the Lord our God. (Ps 20.7)

The fear that there will not be enough is powerful. If we didn't get enough as little children, we can contract around the fear and become miserly with our resources, our emotions, the talents that God gave us for others, not for ourselves. Avarice is not the same as greed: it is the anxious hoarding that says 'there might not be enough for my old age'. Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool who thinks that at last he has enough - but God tells him 'this night your soul is required of you' (Luke 12.20).

Maybe by overinsuring ourselves against every possible calamity, we are forgetting to live. Growing in trust means learning to enjoy life now a bit more, and not looking fearfully at the future. No need to 'trust in chariots' if we learn to have enough.

Reflect on the fact that Jesus teaches a theology of abundance, not a theology of lack. There is more than enough love to go round in God's kingdom. In Jesus, 'every one of God's promises is a Yes' (2 Cor 1.20).



c Anagoria / wiki

Prayer

Generous God, you gave your Son to save me from death. Enlarge my heart, teach me to be generous in return and to share the love you give me.

Amen.

Jesus says 'This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had.' (Mark 12.43-4)

Where am I generous and where not?

Action

Whatever you normally give in a week, double it this week.

If you are a doormat who always says Yes, try saying Yes to yourself, as God does.

Palm Sunday & Holy Week

Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of the arrogant,
and of the contempt of the proud. (Ps 123.5)

Pride is the most insidious soul-contraction, because it is a disease of the good. You have to be doing well to fall into this trap. But it is fundamentally anti-God. Pride says ‘I don’t need God, I can do it myself’. Or ‘I have earned my place in heaven.’ But no-one can earn God’s love: it is a free gift. We all need God, and we all fall short of what God made us to be. If I am self-sufficient, I am curved in on myself and turned away from God; and contempt of those who are not as successful as I am is only a breath away. I make my own self into an idol and deny God the honour and love that I owe him as his creature. How different is Jesus Christ, who ‘emptied himself, taking the form of a servant’ (Philippians 2.7) and died on the cross that we might live.

Reflect on the fact that even pride is ultimately driven by fear: the fear that someone might exist who is better than you and therefore threatens you. To a proud person Jesus is the ultimate threat; no wonder he was crucified.

A humble person is delighted if other people are even better, and rejoices to make them known. It is easy for such a person to reach out to Jesus.



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Prayer

Loving God, you stooped to raise fallen humanity by sending your Son to be born as one of us and to die at our hands. Teach me to rejoice in being a humble guest at the eternal banquet of my Lord and King. 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)

Where can I detect hidden pride and self-sufficiency in my attitude?

Action

Do something at home or at work that you would normally think of as low status and not your job.
Acknowledge God’s share in something that you have done well.

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 'sin of the 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 keeping last week's psalm verse in your mind over the week. Then pray together.

Extra material: the text in the dark green box is there for further reflection if you wish.

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



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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.**



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