

# Lent In Seven Objects

## Reflections for prayer

A prayer resource for each week of Lent, centred around an object to get you thinking. There will be a picture to look at each week, but if you can find an actual object in your own household, it will make the prayer exercise more meaningful for you.

There will be a suggestion to ponder and something to do each week, as well as a quote from Jesus (in the green box). You may like to hold this in your mind through the week.



Lent is when we think about our sins and selfishness, in order to say sorry to God and receive grace to change. It is also for spending more time in prayer than we normally do, drawing closer to God. We give God more of our attention and he pours out his love and grace on us. We can ground our praying in a concrete object, so as to tie our thoughts about God, and our talking to him, more closely to our everyday reality. Holding an ordinary thing like my car keys can become a gateway into perceiving God present with me as I do my morning commute. I can discover God in all things. All of my life, my history and my present-day concerns, are open to his grace: they are all ways for me to experience his love and support.

Jesus says 'No' to the tempter three times, because he knows that he is God's beloved Son. God looks on us too as sons and daughters because we belong to Jesus. The more we can be aware of God looking at us with kindness, as a father does his beloved daughter, his beloved son, the more we can draw strength from that knowledge to turn away from our temptations and walk the path that Jesus leads us on. We learn to desire what is *really* for our good, and turn away from what gives us the moral equivalent of a sugar rush: up like a rocket, down like the stick. With Jesus' help we desire what truly nourishes: himself.

# Ash Wednesday to Lent 1



In these first days of Lent we are invited to reflect on the time when we were innocent babies. Before we even understood what was happening, we were being shaped by things beyond our control. The fear and anger our parents carried shaped the way they interacted with us, and so the way we expected the world to be. We learned that love is conditional on good behaviour; we learned that these terrifying big persons on whom we depended could be unkind to us

or leave us alone and frightened. We learned to be tough and to shout for what we wanted; or we learned to creep away and not rely on anyone. And so the typical ways in which we would sin later on began to be laid down: if our early experience was that shouting or violence is successful in getting what we wanted, we might learn to be a bully later on in life. If our early experience was that we got attention if we were hurt, we might learn to manipulate people through making them feel sorry for us, later on.

Eventually we learned a sense of right and wrong, and only then can we speak of sin, when we make a deliberate choice to do what we know to be wrong. And later still we learned the good news that God creates us to be free: we may be predisposed to act in certain ways, but we are free to choose differently, to choose to act as Jesus teaches. Reflecting on the innocence and helplessness of our baby selves, we can feel compassion. God's compassion for us is even greater. He knows we constantly fall into sin; but he is always ready to be reconciled to us when we turn back to him.

## Prayer

**O God, who brought us to birth and in whose arms we die; help us to trust in your love and rejoice in your presence like little children safe and at home. Amen.**

Jesus says: 'It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.' (Matthew 18.14)

What helps you realise that you are one of these little ones?

## Action

Think of someone you find difficult. Imagine them as a baby, as one of God's little ones. Pray for them.

# Lent 1

‘We do not live by bread alone,’ Jesus says to the tempter. We need to allow ourselves to be nourished by the word of God, and Lent is a good time to intensify our engagement with scripture. But what we eat does matter. If my body is overstimulated with sugar, salt and fat, it will struggle to deal with these harmful substances and I will have less energy available for reflection, or engaging with other people. And if I am in the habit of giving myself treats, I will find it harder to step back from immediate gratification in order to think about difficult



things like my sins. So a Lenten fast makes a lot of sense. Consider how you could support this time of reflecting on how you fall short of what God asks of us, and how you deliberately do wrong, by choosing to eat more simply. Lent can be a time of training, both physical and spiritual. We also learn to be more grateful for the good things we enjoy, and for God’s deep love and endless patience with us. One chocolate biscuit on a Sunday, after a week of fasting, will feel quite special - and that can lead us to thinking about those who really are hungry, and sharing our resources with them.

People with eating disorders should not fast. Typically an eating disorder arises out of a feeling of not being in control, of not being good enough. If this is where you are at the moment, it would be much better to spend Lent focusing on God’s loving-kindness, and claiming the space that is yours in God’s kingdom.

## Prayer

**Loving God, you know all our desires. Help us to understand that what we are really looking for is you. Amen.**

Jesus says: ‘Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.’ (John 6.27)

Why do I ‘labour for that which is not bread’ (Isa 55)? What does that say about my priorities?

## Action

Take something simple like a slice of bread or a banana and eat it as slowly as you can. Notice how intensely you taste it when you pay attention. Give thanks to God.

# Lent 2

This picture of car keys invites us to think about status. Many people spend more than they can really afford on their car, because they want to present a certain image to the world. Remember how the tempter offers Jesus 'the kingdoms of this world and their glory' if he will worship him. Cars are not bad in themselves, but it's worth looking honestly at why we chose the car we have. To what extent are we looking for admiration? How do we think about people who can't afford a car? Do we secretly look down on them or blame them? What about my carbon footprint? Reflecting like this isn't meant to pile on the guilt, but to help you grow in self-knowledge. We can all benefit from noticing where our status anxiety makes us vulnerable to making selfish or short-sighted choices. If we are secure in our sense of being held by God's love, we don't need to prop up our egos with fancy cars - or anything else.



Isaiah says 'their land is filled with horses and there is no end to their chariots' (Isa 2.7): he says piling up material possessions is a sign of having turned away from God. But it makes a difference whether our choices are driven by pride or by anxiety. Do I notice the difference in myself?

## Prayer

**Patient God, humble my pride and raise me up out of my fears, that I may follow you with a free heart. Amen.**

Jesus says, 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth' (Matthew 6.19)

What ties me down? How do I know the difference between needs and wants?

What would challenge me most if I had to give it up?

## Action

Take on a task at home or at work that you think of as low status. Pay attention to your inner attitude: are you waiting for someone to congratulate you or thank you? Who does this job normally? Do you congratulate or thank them?

# Lent 3



This week we're invited to think about living dangerously. The tempter challenges Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple, and Jesus says 'you shall not put God to the test.' Ladders are one of the major causes of accidents in the home, because people try to stretch further than they can really reach, or lose their balance because they're not paying attention. God's care for us doesn't mean we have no responsibility for taking care. That includes being aware of the consequences of our choices. If I spend all my time with people who lie, speak contemptuously of others and behave dishonestly when they think they can get away with it, it's going to rub off on me. If I watch violent TV or gossip online, my sense of what is

acceptable behaviour is going to be coarsened. 'Bad company ruins good morals', says St. Paul (1 Cor 15.33). In Lent we are invited to put ourselves in an environment that will support our trying to become a better person. I can make time to be with people I admire for their kindness or generosity. I can read books or watch films that tell stories of self-sacrifice or faithful love. And I can make extra time for prayer: being with God is the best way to become more like Jesus.

## Prayer

**Holy God, reframe my worldview so that I see what you see; set in my heart the longing to be holy for you. Amen.**

Jesus says, 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness' (Matthew 5.6)

What is righteousness, or being-right-with God, in my context, right now? What is holiness?

Who do I know who is right with God? Can I spend more time with them? Can I spend more time with Jesus?

What is the bad company or bad habits I am being invited to let go of?

## Action

Read a book or watch a film about good people; talk about it with someone else and reflect on how you would have responded to the challenges in the story.



# Lent 4



image c Kerry Lannert/ flickr

The overfull diary is a real challenge to developing a closer relationship with God. How often have we missed something important because of a diary clash? Or we are so preoccupied that we can't respond appropriately when something unexpected happens. We miss the opportunity to say something kind to someone who has had bad news, because our mind is on the next thing. We drive aggressively because we're late. We don't listen to our child who would have confided something really important if they had sensed that we were paying attention. Some churches have a fast from committee meetings in Lent, which is a great idea. Perhaps we could make space for more time with family or friends, doing something together, this Lent. And then we could reflect on what this time has shown us about God and our relationship with him. If you're driven by duty, perhaps put dates in the diary for phoning or meeting your friends; set aside an hour every so often for unexpected things turning up. Not to mention prayer...

## Prayer

**Maker of time, give me peace of heart in my busy life, and the sure knowledge that there is always time enough to love you and love my neighbour. Amen.**

Jesus says, 'So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.' (Luke 12.21)

You may not feel you have control over your diary at all; but your family and friends have a right to your attention too.

What is hardest for you to justify spending time on?

What is God's view on that?

## Action

Find one thing you can change about the way you use time.

# Lent 5

Boots may speak to us of relaxing holidays, or of hard daily work. Or they may be a painful reminder that age has taken away things we used to enjoy. They can help us reflect: are there people that we 'walk all over'? Are there people who 'walk all over' us? What is it like to be powerless, or powerful? What might I need to ask for from God, so that I can change my behaviour? If I bully others or expect them to put my interests first, am I aware of it? Many of us have a sense of entitlement in one or other area of life; we could try putting ourselves in the position of those from whom we expect that service. What would Jesus do, who washed his disciples' feet?



Or if I am on the receiving end, why do I put up with being a victim? What do I need from God in order to take my rightful place in his world? What would Jesus encourage me to do?

## Prayer

**Loving God, you give more than either we desire or deserve. Help me to let go of entitlement and power, and give and receive generously and humbly; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.**

**Amen.**

Jesus says to the Pharisees, 'You lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.' (Matthew 23.13)

Where does my sense of entitlement blind me to what God asks?

Where do I make other people's life more difficult?

Or, how does my passivity keep me small and let me avoid doing what Jesus may ask of me?

## Action

Draw a picture of yourself (stick men is fine) and the most important people you relate to: family, work, friends. Draw important ones bigger and others smaller. What size are you? Why?

What would it be like if you were all the same size?

# Palm Sunday & Holy Week



This week we walk alongside Jesus in his suffering and acknowledge our part in the sin that nailed him to the cross. When spending time with Jesus, reading the story of the Passion and being close to him in prayer, we may or may not have intense emotions, but we will certainly have given him the precious gift of our attention. And God always responds when we reach out to him, though sometimes at deep levels that we

can't immediately perceive. Later we will notice that something has changed in the way we respond to those around us. Grace has been at work in us; God has been bringing life out of death, as he always does, and as he especially does in raising Jesus from the dead, who brings us along with him because we are part of his body.

Above all, this week is for facing up to the fact that we too are among those who crucify Jesus. These three nails can invite us to think of the three worst ways in which we have sinned, and acknowledge them to God. When we have done that, we can thank Jesus for taking away those sins and setting us free from them. Whatever lies in the past, God has forgiven us. Thanks be to Jesus for dying to save us and give us life.

## Prayer

**Loving God, you keep faith with us when we betray you and reach out reconciling hands. Give me the courage to walk away from what is destructive, and to walk with Jesus the way that leads to life. Amen.**

Jesus says 'One of you will betray me.' (Matthew 26.21). But he also says, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' (Luke 23.34)

When have I deliberately gone against what I know to be God's will?

When have I slid into doing wrong without fully understanding what was going on?

## Action

Take three nails to symbolise your three worst acts; choose whether to think in terms of your whole life, or perhaps since last Lent. Bind them together in the shape of a cross as a sign of your thanksgiving that you are no longer imprisoned by them. They are gone, taken away, and you are free.



# 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 and discuss it. 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 words of Jesus in your mind 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