

Lenten Journey

Forty-Two Days of Reflection

By Anand Peter

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About This Book

These forty-two reflections were written and shared, one for each day of Lent, in the spring of 2020. They are gathered here, for the first time, as a single, continuous work — a companion for the whole of the Lenten season, from Ash Wednesday to the Tuesday following Easter.

The days are presented without calendar dates, so that the book may be read in any year, by anyone keeping Lent: only Ash Wednesday, the traditional first day of the season, is named on Day One. Each day stands on its own, as a short daily reading, yet the forty-two together trace a single journey — from an anchor found in the crucified and risen Christ, through reflections on mortality, heaven, and the inner life, to the events of Holy Week and the Cross itself.

The book may be read a day at a time, in step with Lent itself, or straight through at any time of year.

Day One in Lent

Lent, it is often told to us, is a time of introspection, repentance, forgiveness, and sacrifice, leading to celebrations on the morning of Easter Sunday to proclaim that our God is alive and is a living God.

Introspection sounds the right note to strike, and is easier said than done. There are right ways and wrong ways to introspect. We can spend endless amounts of time in self-reflection but emerge with no more self-insight than when we started. It is not like confessing in a confession box, where one, most often, guardedly lets the priest know the wrongs done. Mostly it will be recent events, forgetting or ignoring the inner, hidden sins. In confession, you have an anchor in the priest. In introspection, you are in solitude. The point I want to make today is that even when you are alone, you should, and can, have an anchor to hang on to, or use as a reference point.

In this extremely fast-paced world, millions forget how to live for themselves and others. When one does, they live wrongly for themselves and, incidentally, act selfishly towards others. Introspection is about taking time to think about your life and your purpose, as well as your place in the world. It is about questioning the choices you have made, to check now and then that you are still living true to your values, which you have picked up from the Holy Book, the Bible, especially from the Gospel accounts.

Having said that, I began to think about the anchor: who or what it could be. That took me way ahead in Lent, to that fateful Friday when my Lord experienced crucifixion, and all the mental and physical torture of that ordeal, and eventually, physical death, which was unique in that He died of His own volition. However, He also experienced even more than this, in that He experienced spiritual death as a substitute for sinful humanity. Have you ever thought about it: that He also died a “spiritual death” for you and me, to redeem the entire human race from sin and Satan, and to reconcile them to a Holy God, and propitiate a Holy God?

Just do not read past these statements as something already known to you. We know that Jesus suffered pain; He suffered excruciating pain. The word “excruciating” shares its Latin root with “crucify” and “crucifixion” — both come from *crux*, the cross — a reminder of just how literally the word applies here. To die upon a cross meant excruciating mental and physical pain. Death came slowly, after extraordinary agony, through exhaustion and suffocation. The terrible open wounds from scourging and spikes in the hands and feet, the agonising thirst and hunger, the haemorrhaging of the blood vessels in the head and heart, the scorching heat of the sun, gradually robbed Jesus of all strength. Medical studies show that death itself was caused by asphyxiation. A normal person would have been driven close to insanity, but the seven sayings of Jesus, spoken from the cross, were profound and radical lessons for us.

Read Mark chapters 14 and 15. If you have any scientific material about the crucifixion — if you have the stomach to study the details; if you do not, you may ask me and I will provide it for you — read that too. When you begin your introspection, begin with Jesus and the excruciating pain He suffered for you and me, as your anchor. Never dismiss the event of Christ’s crucifixion as something expected of Him. You can go very wrong there, as He could have avoided all that. Feel His excruciating pain, and dig deep into your inner self to see how many of His teachings, the values He wants you to internalise, you have forgotten, neglected, or violated in your life, and resolve to bring about the course corrections needed in your life.

May Jesus bless you with a meaningful, and life-changing, Lenten experience.

Ash Wednesday

Day Two in Lent

Immortality within Mortality

In my post yesterday, we began our journey through Lent in reverse order. We looked at the excruciating pain Jesus suffered, spiritually and physically, and how He died on the Cross as a common man, for us.

We all have dreams about a perfect life: a life without pain, sadness, conflict, injustice, hatred, constant fear of war, and other maladies. A “perfect life”, however, remains only our fondest dream. The spiritual challenge before us is

to experience glimpses of this perfect life right in the midst of our many struggles through life. Dreams aside, by embracing the reality of our mortal life, we can get a preview of the eternal life that has been sown in the lives of those who have accepted Christ.

Paul expressed this in no uncertain terms when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:8–12:

“We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus’ sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. So then death worketh in us, but life in you.”

How wonderful, then, that the otherwise horrendous death of our Lord Jesus should implant an immortal spirit and life in us. When we accept this immortality within our mortal, physical life, it gives us the spiritual strength to combat the deep-rooted, hidden sins, and the sins we continue to be in denial about.

Only by facing our mortality can we come into touch with the immortal life in the Kingdom of Jesus, which transcends death. Our imperfections open for us the vision of the perfect life that Jesus has promised us.

Let us continue with our introspection.

Day Three in Lent

Mortality and Heaven

Do not give up on reading, just because I continue to dwell on mortality. I do so because I feel the Bible tells us not to be troubled by it. Fear of death is what every religious system has had to wrestle with, and in the process, humanity has only succeeded in dividing God’s people along religious lines. But Christianity is different: unlike the founders of other religions, who were mortals like you and me, our Lord is a living God, and the Resurrection of Christ itself proclaims eternal life.

We often hear, from the pulpit, expressions such as the Incarnation, the Passion of Christ, His substitutionary, sacrificial death on the Cross, redemption, resurrection, and salvation. Everything finally leads us to salvation, to heaven, to the Kingdom of Jesus, and to His new creation. We struggle through this short life, run the race, and want to be in heaven. We think of loved ones who have passed into glory, and picture them there. But the fact remains that we do not truly know what heaven is like. I certainly do not. What I do know is that the Bible tells us heaven is real, and that Jesus is preparing a place for us to live with Him. We will look at this over two days, today and tomorrow.

Death, cancer, accidents, sickness, and addiction do not have the last word over a believer’s life, because Christ has already conquered death on the Cross, and by His gift we have an eternity to look forward to. We can be confident that heaven is real, and full of hope, because it is where Jesus Himself reigns — whatever dark place we may find ourselves in as we wonder about it.

Jesus gave us His own assurance:

“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14:1–3).

We do not need to be afraid, or to let our hearts stay troubled and our thoughts unsettled. Heaven, on Christ’s own promise, is a real and spacious place — not the thin picture some of us grew up with, of clouds and harps and an eternal, aimless rest. Jesus is there even now, at work preparing a place for us to join Him.

Paul wrote, in 1 Corinthians 2:9–10:

“But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.”

We simply cannot comprehend all that is still in store for us — it is that good, that far beyond our present imagining. The Bible, in fact, tells us far more about the gift of Christ, and the forgiveness and new life He alone can offer, than it tells us exactly what to expect in heaven itself. I take that as a reminder to stay alert and active in sharing light and love in a world that badly needs His hope; this life is short, and our days pass quickly, so let us use them wisely, so that many more may come to hear God’s truth now, and to know heaven for themselves one day.

We cannot begin to comprehend an eternity with no more pain or sorrow in it — that alone is remarkable news. This is exactly what is proclaimed in Revelation 21:3–4:

“And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

Our minds, limited as they are, can only picture something physical. Reading through these three passages together, I am left with the sense that in heaven, Christ takes us into a fourth dimension, where it becomes nothing less than an unending experience with Jesus Himself. More to follow tomorrow.

Day Four in Lent

Mortality and Heaven — Part Two

I have thought a lot about heaven this past year, maybe more than ever before. I do think about my Dad and Mum, who had gone to be with the Lord decades ago. Losing a loved one will do that to you. Within a little over a year, five people whom I had known well in my home church left this world and passed through heaven’s gates — that is what I want to believe. Their stories were different; they were unique in their own ways; but one thing they had in common was that they all loved Jesus with all their heart. And though the pain lingers, we know they are in a much better place, in the Kingdom of Jesus. No more cancer, struggle, tears, or suffering. No more pain.

I do not claim any understanding of how His Kingdom looks, except for some indications contained in the Holy Book, the Bible. We looked at three passages yesterday. Today we will look at a few more. All these passages are promises made by none other than God the Son, Jesus Christ, and should be studied not critically, but knowing that He is God, and not a politician making false promises.

Let us read 1 Corinthians 15:40, 54:

“There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another... So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.”

I often ask myself, when the resurrection is discussed, whether we want our present bodies back after the resurrection. I do not, if I have a choice; my body today is not the way God created me. I have many inefficient body parts, and even a few spare parts within me. If I had a choice, I would want the body I had as a young man. But all such thoughts are, of course, futile.

God promises that we will be made new. We will have heavenly bodies for eternity, and will no longer be susceptible to sickness or physical weakness as we know it here on earth. Contrary to some popular ideas, we do not become angels in heaven. We are God’s children, and have received the amazing gift of eternal life because of Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf. The Scriptures tell us that our heavenly self will resemble who we are today, and that we will recognise others in heaven whom we have known here on earth. Many may wonder what becomes of a baby who dies, or an older person — is that the age they remain in heaven? Though the Bible does not tell us anything on

this (rightly so, since not all divine mysteries are yet revealed to us), we can believe that if Christ is giving us a body for eternity, and He is the Master Creator of all things, it will be the best there has ever been, and far greater than anything we have known here on earth. Jesus does nothing without purpose. I want to believe that, in giving us a new body for eternal life, He has a great purpose for us in heaven too.

One mistake we often make is to read the Holy Book casually, and accept its statements only for their literal meaning. The Bible is like a vast field with precious things hidden in it; the more we dig, the more we understand what is being said. Keep this in mind especially when we come to study the Book of Revelation. Through its chapters we find glimpses of heaven, and of what is still to come, as John reveals the vision given to him — remembering that John could only describe his vision in terms of his own, and his readers', worldly knowledge.

Let us now look at Revelation 21:18, 19, 21, and 23:

“And the building of the wall of it was of jasper; and the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass. And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald... And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; every several gate was of one pearl: and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass... And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.”

God's powerful presence is greater than any darkness we may face on this earth, and there is no darkness there at all. His words go on to say that in eternity, the gates will never be shut, and there will be no night. There will be nothing impure, no shame, no deceit — only those whose names have been written in the Lamb's book of life.

How else could one describe the dwelling place of God?

Let me conclude: Christ came to set us free. He chose to die on the Cross; He was willing to do that, for you and for me, so that we could be forgiven our sins and wrongs, and receive the gift of eternal life. That is true freedom. There is no other way we can be saved but through Jesus. He was buried and placed in a tomb, but He did not stay dead. He rose again, and is now in heaven; He defeated death, sin, and Satan, and has given us His Spirit to help us in this life. The Bible says that if we confess Him as Saviour and Lord, and believe in our hearts that He was raised from the dead, we will be saved. Pray to Him today, and know that He is with you always, and will never let you go.

Day Five in Lent

Let Go of Our Fear of God

As we progress through each day in Lent with prayer and meditation, we should be getting closer and closer to Jesus. When we do, He takes hold of our hand and leads us through the path He has set for us, even before we were born. We cannot be close to someone we fear. If reading the Old Testament has, mistakenly, given you the impression that God is cruel, and is just waiting to swat you like a fly the moment you sin, you need to read the Gospels again, and set that impression aside. Jesus, as God the Son and the true image of God the Father, has shown us how compassionate and loving God is, and how much He cares for us.

We are afraid of emptiness. We have a horror of vacancy. We like to occupy, and fill up, every empty time and space in our lives; and if we leave our space and time unoccupied, we easily become “preoccupied” — that is, we fill the vacancy with our worries, saying “but what if...”. Satan, too, is waiting to occupy that space.

What we must tell ourselves during this Lent is that God wants to dwell in our emptiness. But as long as we are afraid of God, and of what God may do in our lives, it is unlikely that we will offer our emptiness to Him.

Jesus came to help us overcome our fear of God. We cannot love someone we are afraid of. Love means intimacy, mutual vulnerability, and a deep sense of safety. Fear creates suspicion, distance, defensiveness, and insecurity.

God is perfect love. John wrote, in 1 John 4:18:

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.”

He goes on to say that God loved us first, and that we should therefore love Him. Let us begin to love God with unconditional love, and free ourselves from the fear of God.

Day Six in Lent

The Olivet Discourse — A Message of the Second Advent

Lent is a good time for all believers to reflect on the many teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ, undertake solemn reflection, and share learning with others. Let us turn to the Gospel of Mark, chapter 13:1–23. We find here the Olivet Discourse, so named because Jesus spoke these words while He was on the Mount of Olives, looking directly at the Jerusalem Temple. This is an important and well-known section of the Gospel, and there is so much interest and speculation about the end times in our own day and age. It is in these passages that Jesus instructs His disciples about what is yet to come after His death and resurrection. This is also one of the most hotly debated passages in the Bible, since virtually all end-times views claim their view is the view Jesus taught. Ironically, all views represented only partial or distorted versions of what our Lord had predicted.

Before His death and resurrection, the disciples had a great deal of trouble making sense of our Lord’s words. In fact, the questions they put to Jesus, which serve as the occasion for Jesus to teach them about the course of the future, demonstrate how little they understood about what Jesus was doing and teaching. Understandably, the disciples were very confused and were struggling to make sense of the difficult things which Jesus had been teaching them. This was especially so in light of the surprising turn of events — the fierce opposition to Jesus by the establishment. How much they really comprehended, or wanted to believe, when Jesus had on three occasions predicted His imminent death and resurrection, is anybody’s guess.

As we study Mark 13, we too get to sit at the feet of our Lord Jesus as we hear for ourselves what He had to say about the future. Every word uttered by our Lord had a clear purpose, a purpose that would take believers a step closer to doing His will.

In response to two questions put to Him by the disciples, Jesus now warns them about what will happen when the covenant curses finally come down upon Israel, when the magnificent Temple is destroyed, Jerusalem is ransacked by the Romans, and the Jews are dispersed into the four corners of the earth, all as a result of the events of the year 70. He mixes together images of an immediate event (the destruction of the Temple) with an event about which the disciples could not even begin to understand, His Second Advent.

We see how little Christ values outward pomp, where there is no real purity of heart. He looks with pity upon the ruin of precious souls and weeps over them, but we do not find Him looking with pity upon the ruin of a fine building. Our Lord’s words were appropriate to His solemn mood. Little could all the solid strength of the very foundations of the world itself prevail against the thunderbolt of God. Moreover, it was a time when He felt most keenly the consecration, the approaching surrender of His own life. In such an hour no splendours distract the penetrating vision; the entire world is brief and frail and hollow to the Man who has consciously given Himself to God. It was the fitting moment at which to utter such a prophecy.

Jesus also talked about future events connected with His Second Coming, when He will judge all people. Some of His disciples lived to see the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. This would have assured them, and it should assure us too, that everything else He predicted will also come to pass.

Through these prophecies Jesus warned His followers about the future, so that they could learn, and teach others, how to live in the present. The reason some of His prophecies are yet to happen is to help us remain spiritually alert and prepared at all times as we wait for His return. Do not get carried away by any timeline that people may speak of; they do so because the signs are apparent to them, but that is no reason for us to relax.

To be ready for the Second Advent means being ready to be courageous witnesses. My friends, the signs are written large before us — are we ready to do our part, however small it might be, in fulfilling God’s will?

Day Seven in Lent

A Recipe Jesus Loves

I often collect and archive, systematically, piquant and delicious recipes for future use. Yesterday I posted one simple South Indian recipe in one of our church WhatsApp groups, for a co-congregant. I began to wonder what recipe Jesus must have used when He fed five thousand men and more, not counting women and children — a miracle, apart from the Resurrection, reported in all four Gospels. Here is an account of the miracle, to refresh our memories:

“He saith unto Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat? And this he said to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do. Philip answered him, Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little. One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, saith unto him, There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many? And Jesus said, Make the men sit down. Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. And Jesus took the loaves; and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down; and likewise of the fishes as much as they would. When they were filled, he said unto his disciples, Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost. Therefore they gathered them together, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves, which remained over and above unto them that had eaten.” (John 6:5–13)

With my head full of frying, baking, grilling, and sautéing, I wondered whether the bread was unleavened, and the fish (obviously not curried) grilled, fried, or steamed. Do they keep a cookbook in heaven, from which so large a quantity of bread and fish was furnished?

How foolish I have been, to be so carnal, and not to understand the deeper spiritual lesson Jesus wanted to teach us. His recipe was one full measure of His immeasurable provision of grace, plus a good measure of unbelief and doubt on the part of the disciples (and, presently, of us), plus one full measure of “giving” by a boy in the crowd, of all that he possessed — which we seldom do, or do only with great reluctance — a pinch of physical satisfaction to taste, garnished with a liberal measure of His love and compassion.

“Feed My sheep”, Jesus said. During this season of Lent, we must bring our lives to Jesus in a spirit of obedience and sacrifice, no matter how insignificant we may think our gifts or talents are. If we do so, we may expect God to do for us far beyond what we can even imagine. Amen.

Day Eight in Lent

Viewing Others as “Others” Makes Us Judgemental

Jesus teaches us the Beatitudes, the right Christian attitude one must possess, in His Sermon on the Mount, as reported in Matthew 5. The same body of teaching continues in chapters 6 and 7. In Matthew 7:1–5 we read:

“Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.”

This passage is well known, and the expression is used even in ordinary literary usage, quite apart from its Biblical reference.

Even so, it is one of the hardest spiritual tasks to live without prejudice. Many a time we are not even aware how deeply rooted our prejudices are. We may want to claim that we relate as equals to people who differ from us in

views, colour, religion, sexual orientation, or lifestyle, but in reality our spontaneous thoughts, uncensored words and writings, and knee-jerk reactions often reveal that our prejudices are still there.

Strangers, people different from us, stir up a kind of unknown fear, discomfort, suspicion, and even hostility. They make us lose our sense of security, or feel pushed out of our comfort zones, simply by being “the others.”

Only when we fully grasp that God loves us unconditionally, and look at those other persons as equally loved by God, can we begin to discover that the great variety within humanity is an expression of the richness of Jesus’ heart. Those quite unlike us are just as loved by Jesus, and they too are His people. As this realisation takes deep root in us, the need to prejudge “others” will gradually disappear from our attitude.

May the Good Lord give us more insight into this important aspect of the Christian life during this period. Amen.

Day Nine in Lent

What Is Your “Calling”?

Of late I spend much less time on television news channels, and only occasionally glance through the headlines in the newspaper. The reason is that what you hear or read only adds to the anxiety already present in our troubled lives. So many terrible things happen every day that we start wondering whether the few, seemingly insignificant, things we do ourselves make any sense at all. When people are starving, children die of malnutrition, schools and shops are burned, gun culture becomes the order of the day, when war-like tension prevails in many countries, when countless people lose their homes and livelihoods in a single day — the list is very long — our own efforts look futile, microscopic, and irrelevant. Such a line of thinking, however, can paralyse and depress us, and we lose our spiritual harmony.

Against this backdrop, the word “calling” becomes important. What we forget is that we are not “called” to save the world, solve all its problems, and help all people. At the same time, each one of us has a unique “calling,” in our families, at our workplaces, in society, and in the world at large. Paul wrote on the subject thus:

“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling.” (Ephesians 4:1–4)

Therefore, rather than giving up on this world, we have to keep asking Jesus to help us see what our “calling” is, and to give us the strength and courage to live out that “calling” with unwavering trust in Him. As Paul said, we should walk worthy of our “calling,” and be sincere and honest about it. We should always, in everything we do, think, and undertake, look at matters through the lens of the Gospel.

Then we will discover that our faithfulness to even a small task could turn out to be the most healing response to the ills of our time. May Jesus reveal to us, this season of Lent, what our true “calling” is, as we continue our deep meditation on the subject. Amen.

Day Ten in Lent

How Do You Create Space for the Holy Spirit, Without Knowing Where Your Soul Lives?

The title of today’s Lenten reflection is a question. We know we have a soul — an inner self, as I prefer to call it — apart from our body. It must be within our body, yet easily separable at death without any kind of surgical intervention. Does your inner self reside in some part of your brain, your lungs, or your heart? There is no conclusive evidence of where it is located, or what it looks like. All we have is fiction, as depicted in pictures and films — a transparent figure rising out of the dead body, resembling the dead person exactly.

For Christians, the inner self is an integral part of who you are. You have a body, and you have an inner self, and the two are mysteriously connected. Though not all believe in the resurrection in the same manner in which Jesus was resurrected, all Christians believe in the immortality of the inner self. Even if you are not religious, you probably refer to the inner self as a sort of fluffy spiritual term for your personality, or even just a euphemism for “life”; perhaps you have picked up a copy of “Chicken Soup for the Soul” from an airport bookstall, or joked about selling your soul to the Devil. Any further discussion of the nature of our inner self may take us into the realms of philosophy, so we leave it there for now, as that is not the point I wish to make today.

Discipline is the other side of discipleship to Jesus. Discipleship without discipline is like preparing to run a marathon without ever having trained for it. But disciplined discipleship is like being in constant training and fitness. Spiritual discipline, however, is not the same as discipline in sport. Spiritual discipline involves constant, dedicated effort to create the space and time within our inner self for God the Holy Spirit, where He can become our Master, and where we can respond freely to His guidance.

Solitude requires discipline; worship requires discipline; conversation with Jesus requires discipline; caring for others requires discipline. All of these ask us to set apart a time and a space in which the presence of Jesus can be acknowledged and responded to.

You may have many spiritual plans for this Lent, but without creating the time and space for Jesus within your inner self, wherever it may reside in your body, these efforts may come to nothing. Strive to create that space. Perhaps, one of these days, we will meditate on how we might attempt to create it. Amen.

Day Eleven in Lent

Connecting the Disconnect

The Fall of Man created a great divide between God and man. Over the centuries, this divide kept widening, and as a result man ceased to understand God. He would not listen carefully to hear God speak; even if he did, he failed to comprehend what God was telling him. This happens all the time, between parents and children, between spouses, between friends, and in all relationships. Once the disconnect happens, no one wants to hear or listen to the other.

While God was grieved, and wanted to reconcile with man, it was man who stubbornly moved further and further away from God. Lent is a good time to meditate on how we might work towards reconnecting with God. First and foremost, we should begin by confessing Christ, and claiming that God, through Christ, has reconciled us to Himself. Jesus died on the Cross for this very purpose. It was the most generous expression of grace by God.

Do not dismiss this as something that all Christians know by default. That is believing with our heads. We have to let the truth of this reconciliation permeate through every part of our being. As long as we are not fully and thoroughly convinced that we have been reconciled with God, that we are forgiven, that we have received new hearts replacing our old hearts of stone, new spirits, new eyes that see the glory of God, and new ears that hear God’s “still small voice”, we continue to live in disconnect.

When we fully trust that we do not belong to this world but to Jesus, who has redeemed us with His divine Blood, we will find our true relationship with God, which is all that we need for our minds, our hearts, and our inner selves. We will then experience true liberation, be free in this world, and become ministers of reconciliation. This is not easy; we readily fall back into self-doubt and self-rejection. We need to be reminded constantly, through God’s Word, the Sacraments, and the love of our neighbour, that we are indeed reconciled.

The period of Lent is the apt time to deliberate on this subject, and in the process to reach out to Jesus and admit that we are now reconnected with Him. Amen.

Day Twelve in Lent

Claim Your God-Given Selves

If you ask me which is the one “non-beatitude” Jesus disliked the most, I would say it is enmity, dislike, or hatred that lasts beyond a sunset. He said so in many ways. When Jesus asked us to love our neighbours, when He said to do good to our enemies, when He said to love each other as He did, He told us not to hate anyone, no matter what had passed between us.

Here are some examples. Jesus said, “But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you” (Luke 6:27). And He taught, “Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift” (Matthew 5:23–24). Similar counsel runs all through the Old and New Testaments.

Jesus coupled the command to love your neighbour as yourself with loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. James calls it the royal law. It sounds beautiful, and we should obey it. But loving your neighbour as yourself is not always easy. That is why God made it a command. He knew we would struggle. Making it a command is actually to our benefit. We have to do it on purpose, be intentional about it, sometimes even out of our need.

When we have been deeply hurt by another person, it is nearly impossible not to have hostile thoughts, feelings of anger or hatred, and even a desire to take revenge. All of this often happens spontaneously, without much inner control. We simply find ourselves brooding about what we are going to say or do to pay back the person who has hurt us. To choose blessings instead of curses in such a situation calls for an enormous leap of faith. It calls for a willingness to go beyond all our urges to get even, and to choose a life-giving response.

Sometimes this seems impossible. Still, whenever we move beyond our wounded selves and claim our God-given selves, we give life not just to ourselves but also to those who have offended us.

Your Lenten meditations should begin with the trusted conviction that God did not give us our inner selves the way they are today. We have made a mess of them through our non-beatitudes. Go back to the teachings of Jesus, and pray sincerely for the ability to reclaim your God-given inner self, without which everything else we do will be futile. Amen.

Day Thirteen in Lent

The Twilight Zones of Our Inner Selves

One thing all of us agree about the period of Lent is that we must have more quiet time and introspect — easier said than done. You cannot do a “capsule endoscopy” for an inner-self diagnosis. It has to be done the hard way, and it takes time. You are likely to overshoot the entire period of Lent. Over the past ten days, I have been posting various aspects of our inner selves to help all of us do the introspection properly. First, we must know ourselves better than we think we do.

Many years ago, I read somewhere that one of the things we should do is to write our own obituary. Make it as long as it may go, putting down there what we want others to say about us, usually good things, when we are gone. Use it as a yardstick, and make an honest assessment to see whether we really measure up to what we have put down. If not, make course corrections based on the teachings of Jesus Christ.

As we begin to dig into our inner being, we must realise that there is a twilight zone within us that we ourselves cannot see. Even if we know a great deal about ourselves — our gifts and weaknesses, our ambitions and aspirations, our motives and drives, and of course our spiritual being — large parts of ourselves remain in the shadow of consciousness. In the end, we may be surprised to learn that we are not who we think we are.

It may even be right that we remain partially hidden to ourselves — right, I say, because we could otherwise either begin to put on airs or sink deep into a state of depression. Other people, especially those who love us and care for us, can often see our twilight zones more clearly. Therefore, the way others see and understand us may differ from the way we see and understand ourselves. We will never fully know the significance of our presence in the lives of others; conversely, we may not know the significance of the presence of others in our lives. In light of this, fellowship and community life become critical for us as we introspect.

That is a grace, a grace that calls us not only to humility but also to a deep trust in those who care for us. It is in the twilight zones of our inner being that true love is born. As we develop such humility and love for our fellow beings, we will see the light of the love of Jesus for us, and develop a more intense love for Him.

“By humility and the fear of the LORD are riches, and honour, and life.” (Proverbs 22:4)

Day Fourteen in Lent

Your Inner Self, a Minefield?

For the past several days, our meditations have focussed on the nature of our soul, or inner self. The time has now arrived to begin a journey through it. It is going to be a journey through unknown territory for most of us. We will be venturing on an adventurous trip, if I may use that expression. It is quite possible that some may claim to know the way around well, and not step out. Such a journey needs to be undertaken several times in our lifetime; therefore, there is no harm in doing it during this period of Lent.

Years ago, my wife and I got off the Paris Metro at the wrong station on our way back to our hotel, after a wonderful day of shopping. We soon realised that we were in a suburban area, and all our attempts to find a taxi proved futile. Language presented the biggest hurdle in seeking directions. Everything seemed strange to us. But we walked, looking for some familiar building, a signboard, or a landmark. We walked through immaculately maintained parks with beautiful flowers; we walked along messy construction sites; we passed rubbish dumps; we saw a brawl between two drunk men; we saw old people sitting out in the sun with a bored expression on their faces; we also saw a young couple in love. We were on the unfamiliar roads of Paris for nearly three hours, resting on roadside benches every now and again, before we found our hotel.

If you dare to take a walk through your inner self, your experience would be somewhat similar to what we experienced. The first thing you will realise is that you are moving through unknown territory. You would never have imagined that your inner being looked like what you find there. Nevertheless, you should press on through the twists and turns of your soul. Such a venture, however, should have a purpose. For my wife and me, in the suburbs of Paris, it was to find our hotel. A walk through your soul should be to find your Christian faith. If you successfully complete the journey, you will be blessed with a bonus: Jesus Christ.

This walk through your soul is not going to be easy, as I warned right at the beginning. You are going to discover plenty of landmines of hidden sins, the wrongs you did, the good you failed to do, doubts about Christ you secretly harboured, fear of the unknown, and deceptive ideas planted in you by the evil one, and much more. These are memories and matters you have managed to hide deep within your inner self. You need to look out for these, as soldiers do, without stepping on any, but neutralising each as you go. Whatever you may encounter, simply do not give up. The Holy Spirit will be walking with you, and will take rest with you as you read the Bible.

You need not be terrified when you encounter these landmines. Remember what Jesus said:

“I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

His light will guide you on this journey. Jesus will restore your soul, and His rod and staff will comfort you as you progress. Keep in mind what David sang in Psalm 23:3–4:

“He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

Jesus wants you to take this journey, and He will be with you all through it.

You will also find beautiful things during your journey through your inner being, just as my wife and I saw beautiful gardens full of colourful flowers. You will encounter the many blessings you have received from Jesus. You will discover how much Jesus loves you, and how many times He has forgiven you. You will come across those angels Jesus has sent to help you out of difficult situations, in the form of a stranger, even in the person of someone you disliked. You will understand the value of forgiveness, knowing how Jesus forgave you, time and again. You will know the beauty of pure love, and compassion.

As you complete your journey, you will discover the real you. You will emerge much stronger in your faith, and you will have experienced Jesus Christ in the process.

Passages for reflection:

“Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” (1 Corinthians 5:7–8)

What are you waiting for? Now is the time to begin your journey through your soul. Amen.

Day Fifteen in Lent

Creation, a Sacramental Reality

David wrote, to the chief musician, Psalm 19, as an acknowledgement of the magnificence of God’s creation. Its last line makes it a prayer. It is worth refreshing our minds with the words of Psalm 19:

“The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun, which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race. His going forth is from the end of the heaven, and his circuit unto the ends of it: and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof. The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is great reward. Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression. Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.” (Psalm 19)

How do we live in this creation of God? Do we relate to it as a place full of “things” we can use for whatever need we want to fulfil, and whatever goal we wish to accomplish? Or do we see creation first as a sacramental reality, a sacred space where God reveals to us the immense beauty of the Divine?

As long as we only use creation, we cannot recognise its sacredness, because we are approaching it as if we own it. But when we relate to all that surrounds us as created by the same God who created us, and as a place where the holy presence of God can be experienced, a space that calls us to worship and adoration, then we can recognise the sacredness of the handiwork of God.

Archimedes reportedly proclaimed “Eureka!” when he stepped into a bath tub and noticed that the water level rose — he suddenly understood that the volume of water displaced must be equal to the volume of the part of his body he had submerged. He is said to have been so eager to share his discovery that he leapt out of his bathtub and ran through the streets unclothed. Then there is Sir Isaac Newton, who was reading a book while sitting under an apple tree when an apple fell on his head. This triggered many questions in his mind, and he eventually arrived at the law of gravity. Albert Einstein was very unhappy, and did not like the results he obtained about quantum theory, because, as it turns out, at the very tiniest level of atoms and electrons, the universe does not behave the way one might think: particles of energy can move from here to there without passing in between. Then there is the debate about the beginning of the world.

We will refrain from a science-versus-divinity debate. The question before us is this: despite centuries of research and scientific discovery, is there anything at all that man could create and claim as wholly his own? We try to copy everything, taking our cues from God’s wonderful creation, but we manage only a very poor replica of what He has done, in precision and perfection.

Returning to Psalm 19, we do not know when David wrote this psalm. Perhaps it was one morning, after he had been out all night with his sheep, that he witnessed the beauty of a sunrise. David remembered the glittering stars he had seen at night. God made the sun and the stars. All that David saw told him about God. He heard no words; there was no language. But David knew that everything was telling him about God. He moves from the majesty of the universe to the splendour of God’s law.

Do we stop to look at God’s wonderful sacramental creation in admiration? The cares of this world, the sins that entangle us, the various worldly attractions that entice us, and above all our lack of faith in our Lord, snatch away from us the joy of observing God’s wonderful creation in this light. Lent is the time we should engage in deeper meditation on this subject, and develop an adoring insight into God’s creation.

Day Sixteen in Lent

Meeting the Risen Christ

When Jesus appeared to His disciples after His Resurrection, He convinced them that He was not a ghost, but the same one they had known as their teacher and friend. To His frightened and doubtful friends, He said:

“Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.” (Luke 24:39)

Then He asked them for something to eat, and later, when He appeared to them for the third time, He offered them breakfast, bread and fish — read John 21:9–14.

However, Jesus also showed them that His body was a new spiritual body, no longer subject to the laws of nature. While the doors of the room where the disciples had gathered were shut, He stood in their midst; when Mary Magdalene encountered Him at the empty tomb, she did not at first recognise Him; when Jesus walked with two of His disciples to Emmaus, they did not recognise Him either, so much so that He said to them:

“O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:25–26)

Their eyes were opened only when He broke bread with them at the table. The classic example is Thomas, who demanded physical evidence before he would believe. When Jesus offered them breakfast, nobody dared to ask, “Who are you?” They knew it was Him as He broke bread with them.

I have often wondered how I would respond, or react, if Jesus appeared to me. Would I be suspicious, as the disciples were? Would I be so dumbfounded that I would faint, or die of fright? Would I be ashamed to be in His presence, recalling my innumerable sins? I have no answers to these questions yet.

Do you have answers to these questions, if you found the risen Jesus standing before you? I leave you with the question of how far we have come in our preparation to meet the risen Christ.

Day Seventeen in Lent

Timeless Time in the Kingdom of Jesus

The Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Jesus, has to be real — otherwise Jesus would not have spoken about it a hundred and twenty-six times. The Bible shows us that in the beginning there was only God and nothing else (John 1:1–3), but to give us a reference point it says, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). So the questions are: can time exist without matter? Did time even exist before creation? I do not see how time can exist without matter, because it is matter by which we measure time. Albert Einstein said “no” — time cannot exist without matter — but Sir Isaac Newton believed time can exist without matter, holding that time is absolute; he wrote that time flows equably, without relation to anything external. Solomon wrote, in Ecclesiastes 3:1–3, “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up.” But what happens to time in eternity, or when Jesus comes to establish His Kingdom? We often speak of salvation in eternity. Eternity is infinite, unending time, or timelessness.

There cannot, therefore, be an “after” beyond death. Words like “after” and “before” belong to our mortal life, our life in time and space. Death frees us from the boundaries of chronology, and brings us into the timeless presence of Christ. Speculations about the afterlife are just that — speculation. Beyond death, there is no “first” and “later”, no “here” and “there”, no “past” and “present” or “future”. Jesus is all in all: He lives in space and time, and space and time live in Him. The glorious Second Coming of Jesus, and the resurrection at the end of time, are no longer separated by time for those who are no longer in time.

For us who still live in time, it is important not to act as if the new life in Christ were something we could comprehend, or explain in relation to “time.” His heart and mind are greater than ours. All that is asked of us is to trust Jesus.

Day Eighteen in Lent

Opportunities to Witness

Jesus teaches us how to live in the present time. He identifies our present time as the end time, a time that offers us countless opportunities to testify for Jesus, and to uphold the fact that He is the slain Lamb without blemish, that He is God the Son, and that He wants us in His new creation, His Kingdom. The many disasters in our world, and all the tragedies that happen each day, and the satanic designs of evil people, can easily lead us to despair, and convince us that we are the sad victims of circumstance. But our Lord Jesus Christ looks at these in a radically different way. He calls them opportunities to witness.

Jesus has told us that we do not belong to this world. We have been sent into the world to be living witnesses of God’s unconditional love, calling all people to look beyond the passing structures of our temporary existence to the eternal life promised to us. The period of waiting is not to be passive submission, but active witness for Christ.

Day Nineteen in Lent

Losing and Gaining Our Lives

“Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16:24–26)

If we are to be followers of Jesus in a true sense, we must renounce this world. Renouncing does not mean, as I understand it, becoming a hermit; nor does it mean giving up food and water, and eventually giving up life. It has to mean that we remain among others, to carry on the mission given to us by Jesus. Let us see what He might have meant.

The great paradox of life is that those who lose their lives will gain them. This paradox becomes visible in very ordinary situations. If we cling to our friends, we may lose them, but if we are unpossessive in our relationships, we will make many friends. If fame and importance are what we seek and desire, they often vanish as soon as we acquire them, but if we have no need to be known, we might be remembered long after our deaths. When we want to be at the centre, we often end up on the margins, but when we are free enough to be wherever we must be, we mostly find ourselves at the centre.

These are but a few indicators of what Jesus might have meant. He wants all our possessiveness directed towards the spiritual aspect of our lives; He wants our focus on Him, and wants us free, mentally, to follow the direction He shows us in our lives.

Lent is a good time to introspect, and to find all those worldly things, relationships, and feelings that we consciously or otherwise cling to, and to let them go — losing them in the knowledge that our gains will be manifold in the Kingdom of Jesus.

Day Twenty in Lent

The Way of the Cross and Living Out the Truth

It is often said that some person is very intelligent, and can recall verses from any portion of the Holy Book, the Bible. That may be true, but the fact of the matter is that intelligence, like emotion, is a wholly inadequate foundation for piety. True piety permeates our inner being and naturally evokes intimate spiritual emotion. However, it is far more than emotion or feeling. Piety cannot be absorbed from external sources, but generates itself from deep within our inner being, from our understanding of truth, though that understanding might be embryonic at any given point in time. Every Christian — including scholars in theology, clergy, and laity — is a work in progress, from the perspective of spiritual perfection.

As life-giving truths are often acquired through diligent and disciplined study of the Bible, piety and truth arise from within us as we gain knowledge progressively. It is from here that we begin our “walk with Christ”, which is a life lived according to the truth we generate within ourselves, even if it is still at an early stage.

But, unlike us, God is perfect. As we begin to walk with Jesus, we must love, revere, and desire some share in His perfection, and aspire to be sanctified as we go along. Such a desire is not to be seen as an item on our spiritual wish list, or a New Year’s resolution, which is invariably broken, but as something that flows from our resolute willingness to sacrifice everything — otherwise we will be living an illusion. Piety is our firm resolution to live our faith in the truth taught by Jesus Christ. We must follow the Way of the Cross in our lives. We must give our Lord sincere proof, during these days of our devotion and love, by making the course corrections needed in our lives.

Day Twenty-One in Lent

Standing Under the Cross

The Cross means many things to people. Some have it displayed on their mantel; others wear it around their neck. What does the Cross of Jesus mean to you?

If you think deeply about it, rather than casually using it as a symbol of Christianity, you will realise that the Cross is a contradiction. It can mean death and life, hate and love, violence and peace, accusation and forgiveness, sin and purity, brokenness and wholeness, loss and gain, destruction and restoration, defeat and victory. How one sees the Cross depends on how deep one’s understanding is of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and of His resolute march towards the Cross, which meant for Him certain death.

If it seemed, at first sight, a symbol of death, it was in truth a symbol of His Passion for His people. By dying on the Cross, Jesus turned all its negativity into positivity. For Him, it was a symbol of submission to His mission, obedience to God the Father, unconditional love for His people, an instrument of sacrifice to redeem His people, and a place to reconcile the broken relationship between God and mankind. The Cross, therefore, is not to be seen simply as an upright post with a transverse bar. It is not merely a token that testifies you are a Christian, and it should not be used as an ornament.

The question before us is where we stand concerning the Cross. Some may want to claim greater closeness to it than others, forgetting that all of us are spiritual work in progress, as I said in yesterday's reflection. All of us are at an equal distance from the Cross; rather, we should be standing erect, holding our heads high, at the foot of the Cross.

Let us be like Mary, the mother of Jesus, who stood under the Cross, trusting in God's faithfulness, notwithstanding the death of her Child. The facts of everyday life can be a rich source of doomsday thinking and feeling. But the Cross gives us the strength to resist temptation, and to stand erect with self-confidence in this world, never losing our spiritual ground, always aware of what Jesus assured us:

"Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away." (Luke 21:33)

During this period of Lent, let us prepare ourselves to be at the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Day Twenty-Two in Lent

God's Faithfulness and Our Response

Our reaction to any crisis reflects something of the state of our secular, godless society. The problem is rarely the crisis itself — however serious it might be. Outbreaks, disasters, and calamities are facts of life, like so many that have plagued humanity over the ages. While a crisis itself may be neutral, our reaction to it can have real consequences. Much more volatile than any crisis is the fear it produces. A kind of collective panic can rattle the globe. In this sense, our reaction to crisis is often extremely political and secular. It reflects a society that has turned its back on God. We face each crisis trusting only in ourselves and our own devices.

I am not for a moment denouncing the great efforts and sacrifices of the many people who fight against such calamities when they come upon the world unexpectedly. These must continue. The worldwide upheaval caused by such crises often has many people reaching for their Bibles, and some starting to wonder: could this be a sign of the apocalypse? However, most who study Revelation closely do not see any particular crisis as heralding the Second Coming and the end of life on earth as we know it. But that is not the point I want to make today.

In all the confusion and dread, we should not forget God's faithfulness. When God makes a covenant with us, God says, "I will love you with an everlasting love. I will be faithful to you, even when you run away from Me, reject Me, or betray Me." In our times we do not speak about covenants; we speak about contracts. We say, "I will fulfil my part as long as you fulfil yours. When you do not live up to your promises, I no longer have to live up to mine." Contracts, written, spoken, or even assumed, are often broken because the parties are unwilling, unable, or not faithful to the agreements made — just as the human race has never been truly faithful to God, though man has generally acknowledged Him.

God, however, did not make a contract with us; God made a covenant with us, and God wants our relationships with one another to reflect that covenant. God is a loving, kind, and compassionate God, and will remain always faithful to His people. It is time we trust Him more than we ever have.

Day Twenty-Three in Lent

Being in the Church, Not of It!

In every generation, Satan, the adversary and accuser, has reinvented the same old storylines of doom and gloom. Only his tactics are no longer disguised, and have grown more brazen and unbelievable, to the point that many have

come to believe and accept defeat, and to live in a depressed and fear-ridden state of mind. God knew there would be chaos and times of uncertainty in the world. That is why He gave us His Spirit to indwell in us, to encourage us, and to see us through all calamities, whatever those might be.

There are times when governments, or circumstances beyond anyone's control, discourage the gathering of people together, as a precaution against some crisis or other. Shops, clubs, educational institutions, offices, and places of worship can all be closed for a season. In such times, many churches suspend their regular Sunday services, and some adopt other ways of worship. This unsettles regular churchgoers. We tend to seat ourselves at a particular place in the pews, Sunday after Sunday. We miss that place, and we miss others in their respective places. An unspoken fear — that God will turn His face away from us if we do not go to church — can haunt us at such times.

To understand how we need not be of the church, let us turn to the Holy Book. Often we hear it said that we have to live in this world without being of the world. Jesus prayed:

“I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world.”
(John 17:14–18)

It may seem more difficult to be in the church without being of the church. Being of the church means being so preoccupied with, and involved in, the many ecclesial affairs, routines, procedures, and clerical “ins and outs” that we are no longer focused on Jesus. The church then blinds us to what we came to see, and deafens us to what we came to hear.

Notice that I have used “church” in the common sense, with a lower-case “c”. One can still be in the Church, which is the body of Christ. The Word is with you, in you, wherever you might be. It may be a great spiritual challenge for some to meditate on the Word without pastoral guidance. But it can be done. Reading the Holy Book does not require outside help; prayer becomes intense, and a true conversation between Jesus and you, when you pray in solitude. That is what Jesus advised us to do — read Matthew 6:5–8.

Day Twenty-Four in Lent

The Renewal of the Whole Creation

I thought it apt, in a time of stress and fear such as any of us may face, to meditate on this topic and seek to draw solace from it. The last chapter but one of the last book of the Bible, Revelation, begins by stating:

“And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.” (Revelation 21:1)

This corroborates what Paul stated in Romans 8:20–21:

“For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.” (Romans 8:20–21)

This is a somewhat difficult statement, and many interpretations are offered by scholars. Let us read it as: the creation was subjected to futility by the fall of man, engineered by Satan, but God offers hope in the deliverance of His creation from the bondage of corruption.

The creation, meaning all that God has made, is suffering. It is subjected to something described by the Greek word “mataiotēti.” This term implies something warped, perverse, sickly, weak, or false. This futility, or frustration, came long ago, when sin entered the world. God did not create the world this way, and creation itself did not choose this. The trees and streams and animals and sky did not choose an existence of frustration. God cannot bear to see His creation suffer. That hardship came after all was meaningful and “very good”, as God declared.

There is only so much that humanity, still not free from sin, can do about this situation. But our solace comes from the fact that Jesus died to redeem everything. The redeemed cannot exist for ever in a stressful, corrupt creation. Therefore, in light of this, we must begin to understand that His redemptive power is for the entire creation, which includes human beings. The full freedom of the children of God is to be shared by the whole created order, and our complete renewal in the resurrection includes the renewal of the universe. That is the vision of God's redeeming work through Christ.

Paul sees the whole created order as a woman groaning in labour, waiting eagerly to give birth to new life. The world is groaning, running here and there, under the weight of dangers it cannot always see or fully understand. We must understand that our final homecoming involves not just ourselves and our fellow human beings, but the entire creation. O man, where is your ingenuity? Where is your arrogance? Where is your desire to rule the world? Where is your pretended power and one-upmanship? Where is your cunning deception? All of that is futile until we turn to the one and only Triune God. Let us not be like the Laodiceans, lukewarm, but passionate for Jesus in our relationship with Him.

Day Twenty-Five in Lent

Praying Psalm 23

I have come across many prayers, at different times, by pastors and others of varying Christian denominations. So many prayers, in times of crisis, focus on the threat we happen to be facing. I wonder why we do not more often turn to praying Psalm 23. This well-known psalm is so rich with peace and blessing for all our days. Yet, because we so often become "familiar" with popular verses and chapters of God's Word, we almost lose the important message He is wanting to instil within our hearts.

Praying God's words back to Him, and meditating on this psalm, can help us to remember His goodness, and be strengthened by His truths. This short psalm of six verses, paraphrased, would read as:

"Jesus, our Good Shepherd, leads us. He guides us. He is always with us, and we can be assured, and feel safe, under His protective care. He knows where true rest and blessing are found, and He leads us there. He restores us. He refreshes us. He brings peace and goodness to us. He leads us to walk in His ways. He draws us to stay close to Him, and to follow Him."

Verse four is critical for us, to help us face with confidence whatever present threat we may meet, the depth and extent of which is unknown to us. It reads:

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." (Psalm 23:4)

Though life is uncertain, and we may suffer illness, or the possibility of it, or loss, or pain, our God of comfort, our Lord who holds all power over death and disease, walks with us. He is the only One who can take us by the hand through life's darkest moments of suffering and great fear, bringing freedom and healing from the pain of this life, straight into glory and the hope of His Kingdom that He has reserved for us. We never have to fear, in life or in death, for He is with us, our constant strength and Shepherd.

Going forward with verses five and six, we are assured that we have a place at His table, and that He wants us to stay close to Him. Through history, hosts were expected to protect their guests at all costs. God's protection is real, amid the traps and attacks of negative and evil forces; we can find security and refuge in His great care. It does not mean that we will never face great battles, but that He covers us with His Spirit of anointing and power, to live out our days with His strength and blessing. We can be assured that He pursues us today, and all our days, with His goodness and love. And even at the end of all our days here on this earth, He still has more in store for us, and it is greater than we could ever imagine.

The prayer:

Merciful Lord, Jesus Christ, we thank You that You are our good Shepherd, and that we can trust You with our lives. We thank You for Your leadership and sovereignty. We thank You for Your guidance and care in all our days. We thank You that You restore our souls, give us peace, and bring us to hope in all our tomorrows. We thank You for Your protection and strength, which surround us like a shield. We thank You that we never have to fear. We thank You for Your goodness and love, which follow after us and pursue us, even when we are unaware. Thank You, Lord, that You are trustworthy and able, that You are our Refuge and our hope. In You alone are rest and peace. We praise You for the assurance that we will dwell with You for ever. Amen.

Day Twenty-Six in Lent

Are You Stuck in One of Those Tight Spots of Life?

“Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.” (Romans 9:33)

It has now been many years since, right in the middle of my life — a life I thought was going on very well — I ran into a huge boulder, the like of which I had never encountered during my lifelong walk with Jesus. It could have been my stopping place, the point at which I lost not only some of my most cherished dreams, but my joy, my purpose in life, my friends, and my passion to go on — that was how I perceived the situation at the time. It took me a while, but I found out that the rock in my path represented not an obstacle, but an opportunity to encounter the living God in surprising and most astonishing ways. Looking back, I realise that such boulders, big and small, appear more than once in the progress of one’s life. But by then I had learned to deal with it, or at least, that is what I believe.

Perhaps you feel stuck in one of those hard places in life, where your circumstances seem difficult, at times even, it may seem, unbearable. I pray that you will come to realise that the pain of being in this place need not cause you to lose hope. On the contrary, being “stuck” between a rock and a hard place can lead to a transforming and liberating encounter with the one and only true Rock: Jesus Christ.

As I have learned to press into the Rock in the middle of my hard places, I have discovered that I am actually in a position of safety, refuge, and grace. Year after year, God continues to transform my hard places into “grace places”, where I discover surprising gifts of faith, mercy, contentment, praise, blessing, freedom, laughter, and adventure — tailor-made for me, with the tender, loving care of Jesus Christ.

If you press into the Rock, instead of trying to get around it, you will discover a surprise far greater than any gift specially delivered to your doorstep. On the road that is your life right now, you can find a new way of thinking about your circumstances, as well as an astonishing experience of grace, made to order just for you. As you encounter Jesus “on” the way, and not “in” the way, you may come to know Him as you never have before. Press on; do not try to work around it.

Day Twenty-Seven in Lent

Solidarity in Weakness

Compassion is the word we are looking for. The passion of Jesus for His sinning and suffering people made Him incarnate, and His compassion took Him up that rugged Cross to die in our stead. And we know that He died with joy in His heart.

The good Samaritan felt compassion for the robbed and battered Jewish traveller, dying on that lonely stretch of road to Jericho, and attended to him at the point of his need. He later rejoiced when he was told that the traveller had recovered and gone on his way.

Joy is hidden in compassion. The word “compassion” means “to suffer with”. Unless we “feel” the suffering of the needy, we cannot feel compassion for them. It seems quite paradoxical that suffering for another person should bring joy. Yet being with a person in pain, offering simple presence to someone in despair, sharing with someone in times

of confusion and uncertainty, can bring us deep joy. Such joy is not happiness, nor excitement, but the quiet joy that fills up our inner being.

Often this is a solidarity in weakness, in brokenness, in woundedness — but it leads us to the very centre of joy, which is sharing our humanity with others.

Day Twenty-Eight in Lent

God's Unconditional Love Is Not Unconditional Approval

“And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” (Genesis 2:7)

Adam knew that he was the culmination and climax of creation, and that the Creator had just formed a special bond with him — a relationship of love. The first man soon reciprocated God's love with disobedience, and broke the bond of love. The disconnect became ever wider, so much so that man progressively failed to understand the nature of God's unconditional love. Being selfish by nature, he began to mistake God's unconditional love for unconditional approval of his own actions. He thought he simply had to acknowledge the existence of God. He said to himself, “God loves me so much that He gave His only Son for my sake, which I accept; therefore, I have His approval for whatever I do.”

God's love is not like the love expressed by many in our culture today: a love of convenience and reciprocity. That is, “I will love you as long as you add value to my life and please me, as long as you support my line of thinking and action. When that ceases, so does my love for you.” For many, love is conditional. The conditions may differ depending on the relationship, but there are still conditions to be met to “earn” our love. We tend to apply this to God too.

That is when we confuse the unconditional love of God with unconditional approval. Yes, God loves us without conditions, but He does not approve of every human behaviour. He does not approve of betrayal, violence, hatred, suspicion, and all the other expressions of evil, because they all contradict the love God wants to instil in our hearts. Evil is the absence of God's love. Evil does not belong to God.

God's unconditional love means that God continues to love us even when we think, say, and do evil things, and fall far below the values He has set. God continues to wait for us, as a loving parent waits for the return of a lost child — exactly what Jesus brought out in His parable of the prodigal son. We need to hold on to the truth that God never gives up loving us, even when He is saddened by what we do. That truth will help us to return to God's ever-present love.

Day Twenty-Nine in Lent

Authority and Obedience

To be in authority, and yet be in obedience, may appear paradoxical at first glance. Jesus taught us otherwise. He said:

“All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” (Matthew 28:18)

That meant absolute authority, not just on earth, but in heaven too. Jesus also prayed:

“O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.” (Matthew 26:39)

which is absolute obedience. That is exactly what Paul said in Philippians 2:8:

“And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” (Philippians 2:8)

We know from the Gospel accounts that Jesus spoke with great authority, but His whole life evidenced complete obedience to God the Father, assuming the role of a Servant King. Read the four Servant Songs in Isaiah, chapters 42:1–7, 49:1–7, 50:4–10, and 52:13–53:12. The first song mentions the call of the Servant and His divine nature — though divine by nature, Jesus assumes the role of a servant. The second song moves on to the commission that He will reconcile God and humanity — Jesus accepts the task with humility. The third song amplifies His sufferings — He suffers in obedience. And the fourth song describes His consummation, in fulfilling the divine will through His sacrificial death, and His subsequent exaltation.

Based on the life and ministry of Jesus, I want to argue that authority and obedience can never be separated, with some people having all the authority while others have only to obey. Such a separation would produce authoritarian behaviour on the one side, and “doormat” behaviour on the other. A person with great authority, who has nobody to be obedient to, is in great spiritual danger. Similarly, a very obedient person who has no authority over anyone is equally in danger.

The right role model for us is Jesus Christ. This, therefore, is one of the most basic, but most important, lessons we are taught by Jesus through His life.

Day Thirty in Lent

The Unfinished Business of Forgiveness

As Lent draws towards Good Friday, there are times when circumstances beyond our control keep us from gathering in church at all — even from the mid-day service we are so used to observing, all through our lives, on that solemn day. We have heard and read many speculations as to why God allows such trials to come upon the world. I dismiss all of that as mere conjecture, since we have no Jeremiah or Isaiah among us today who could prophesy based on some fresh inspiration from God. I am not about to hazard a guess myself, and that, in any case, is not our subject today.

One of the seven sayings of Jesus on the Cross is recorded by Luke, in chapter 23:34 of his Gospel:

“Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)

That was two thousand years ago, and we still do not know what we are doing. We take refuge behind the oft-spoken assurance that Jesus shed His divine blood and died to redeem us. Having achieved that, He has forgiven us all our sins. Two questions come to my mind when I meditate on the subject: why did Jesus tarry for forty days on this earth after His Resurrection? Why are we still not in Heaven, or in the Kingdom of Jesus?

There could be many answers to these questions. But one answer that comes to my mind is that He had to deal with the unfinished business of preparing us to love one another, by forgiving and having compassion for all. He had to give a final lesson of love to His disciples, and through them, to us. He has fulfilled His part of the bargain — have we? We have still not learnt to forgive and love others.

What makes us cling to life, even when it is time to move on? Sometimes we cling to life because we have not yet been able to say, “I forgive you, and I ask for your forgiveness.” When we have forgiven those who have hurt us, and asked forgiveness from those we have hurt, a new freedom emerges: the freedom to move on, the freedom to love one another unconditionally, and a freedom to be fully prepared to be citizens of the New Creation of Jesus, His Kingdom.

God has blessed us with a period of Lent when we are less distracted by the concerns of this world. We have plenty of time for serious reading of the Bible, especially the Gospel accounts and the interpretations given by the Apostles in the Epistles. Let us use this time given to us to finish the unfinished business of forgiveness. At the end of this time, we will not only emerge resolved to begin our walk with Jesus, but will have come to know Jesus as never before.

Day Thirty-One in Lent

In Jesus, We Are Sans Our Fatality

Paul wrote, in 1 Corinthians 15:54–55:

“So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” (1 Corinthians 15:54–55)

Satan seemed to have secured two victories: one in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), and the other at Golgotha, at the Cross of Jesus Christ. Both events are set far apart in the history of humankind. But God, in one stroke, turned the assumed victory of Satan into irrevocable defeat, when Jesus Christ rose from the dead in Resurrection on that Sunday morning. Thus death is no longer a source of dread or fear. As Christ overcame it, we too will, at the time appointed by God. Death has been defeated, and we have hope beyond the grave. That is why Paul mocked Satan, asking, “Oh death, where is thy sting? Oh grave, where is thy victory?”

Some may wonder how this is possible. In death, our mortal bodies are no more, after burial or cremation. The great mystery of the incarnation is that God became human in the person of Jesus, so that all human flesh could be clothed with divine life. Yes, our lives are fragile, and destined for death. But since God, through Jesus, shared in our fragile and mortal lives, death no longer has the final word. This is the promise of the resurrection, at God’s own destined time.

Science, while not wanting to acknowledge God and His role as the Creator, has come close to acknowledging spirituality, or Divinity, in human beings. A team of scientists has pinpointed the exact portion of the brain that becomes activated when people process spiritual experiences, regardless of whether the trigger is religious or not. The researchers referred to this portion of the brain as the “neurobiological home” of spiritual experience. This is activated whenever people experience a sense of connection — with God, I would argue — that can feel like being overwhelmed by a power greater than oneself. Are they talking about our inner selves? I have no way of verifying this. Creation is so intricate that we are still discovering it. God will reveal everything in His own time. Until then, some questions will remain unanswered, and will remain within the realm of Divine Mystery.

Day Thirty-Two in Lent

The Temptation to ‘Hoard’ Corrupts Our Spirituality

Apt thought for our present times. Jesus said:

“And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: and he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:15–21)

As fearful people, overly concerned about the future, we are inclined to develop a mindset that makes us say, “There is not enough food for everyone, so I had better be sure I save enough for myself in case of emergency.” But being reasonably thrifty, using money and other resources carefully and not wastefully, does not fall under this category.

Once this syndrome sets in, we tend to apply it to every area of our lives. So much so that one may say, “There is not enough knowledge for everyone to know things, so I would rather keep my knowledge to myself.” Jesus said we are the light of the world, and we should never hide it. By now our minds are gripped by this spiritual disease, and we may end up thinking, “There is not enough love, or compassion, or sympathy, or forgiveness, to go around, so I will keep these to myself.” We end up with “non-beatitudes”, or despondency.

This is a scarcity mentality. It involves hoarding whatever we have, out of fear that we will not have enough to survive. The tragedy, however, is that what we cling to ends up rotting in our hands. And who knows how much of it we would even have enjoyed? This Lent, let us resolve to be liberal in attitude concerning everything in our lives.

Day Thirty-Three in Lent

Have You Seen Jesus?

There are times when we encounter such a question. The motive could be to put us down in our faith, or it could even be genuine curiosity from someone who has not known Jesus. This, however, is a question every Christian needs to ask himself, every now and again. Jesus, while ministering on this planet, had been telling His disciples that soon He would not be with them; they would not see Him any more. The Gospel accounts tell us that they, as we are today, did not fully comprehend what Jesus was all about, or what Jesus wanted them, and us, to know. The proof is found in Judas turning traitor; the proof is in the other eleven taking flight when they found Jesus resolutely heading towards the Cross. And eventually, when they found that He had died a terrible death on the Cross, they began to think about their plan “B”. When the King is gone, there cannot be a Kingdom, of which Jesus had often spoken to them. Are we any better than those disciples?

Jesus, however, had been telling them all along where to find Him. Lent is a good time for us to ask ourselves where and how we can see Him, even before His second coming. Let us read Matthew 25:34–40:

“Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” (Matthew 25:34–40)

I am sure we do not have to go too far to find such people, in whom we can see Jesus. That was exactly what Mother Teresa did. Not all of us can be a Mother Teresa. But if you want to see Jesus, all you need to do is look around your own neighbourhood. The greatest Passion of Jesus is His people. Do we have a passion for people like God the Father, Who so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son? Do we have a passion for people like Jesus, Who gave His life not only for His friends, but for His enemies too? Often we think of people as an obstruction, rather than an opportunity to serve.

Communities, as well as individuals, suffer. All over the world, there are large groups of people who are persecuted, mistreated, abused, and made victims of horrendous crimes; there are suffering persons and families, even among our own circle of friends or fellow worshippers, suffering religious communities, and suffering nations. Some seven hundred and ninety-five million people in the world do not have enough food to lead a healthy, active life. That is about one in nine people on earth. In these suffering bodies of people, we must be able to recognise the suffering Christ. They too are chosen and blessed, but in their brokenness they find no help coming.

As we call one another to respond to the cries of these people, and work together for justice and peace, we are caring for Christ. It is only in their midst that we see Jesus. It is time that we left our comfort zones, and began our lookout for Jesus Christ.

Day Thirty-Four in Lent

Fullness in Emptiness!

Jesus asked:

“Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of?” (Matthew 20:22, in part)

In isolation, this question may seem like a reproach. It was not. This question was occasioned when the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus and urged:

"Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom." (Matthew 20:21)

I am sure she pictured Jesus sitting on a throne, in all probability on earth, as most people, including His disciples, then believed. They thought that Jesus would politically liberate Israel from Roman rule, and rule the world. But what Jesus asked was a preamble to what He was about to suffer.

Fullness and emptiness, at first sight, seem complete opposites. But in spirituality, they are not. In the spiritual life, we must empty the cups of our lives, to be able to receive the fullness of God's grace. Jesus lived this on the Cross, when He said, hanging there:

"It is finished." (John 19:30)

That was the fusion of fullness and emptiness, when both became the same.

Jesus emptied Himself, in obedience to God the Father. The bitter cup He had to drink contained a sea of sorrows and sufferings into which He was plunged, and in which He was drenched. It did not contain honours, ease, and pleasure; it contained reproaches, sorrows, sufferings, vengeance, wrath, fury, indignation, and death. Our cups contain our sins, our disobedience to Jesus, the burden of our refusal to reach out to the needy, all the hatred, all the lust, all the greed, and all the pride that we harbour in our hearts, and so much more. When we empty these, we will experience the fullness of the blessings and grace of Jesus Christ. That would be the most glorious moment of fusion in our spiritual life.

Day Thirty-Five in Lent

The Value System Jesus Christ Taught

As Lent draws towards its close, there is still time to read and meditate on chapters five, six, and seven of Matthew's account of the Gospel, which encapsulate the critical teachings of Jesus Christ. Imbibing and internalising these will shape our value system. Then, and only then, can we begin our walk with Jesus in our lives.

Take, for example, the Beatitudes, or the supreme blessedness of which our Lord spoke, which came to be known as the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded by Matthew in chapter five, verses three to eleven. A straightforward question for all of us would be: how many times have we read these verses? Have we found their relevance in our own lives? If not, it is time we re-read these verses, and meditate upon them. Let us see why.

The Beatitudes offer us a self-portrait of our Lord, Jesus Christ. At first, it might seem the most unappealing of portraits; who wants to be poor, mourning, and persecuted? Who among us can be truly gentle, merciful, pure in heart, a peacemaker, and always concerned about justice? Where is the realism here? Do we not have to survive in this world, and use the ways of this world? These are a few of the questions to which we need to seek answers. The process is not as easy as reading the passage a few times. Every attribute requires serious thinking through. When we understand the true meaning of each, we can use it as a yardstick to measure our own levels of adaptation. In one of these we might be at zero, and in another, twenty or even eighty per cent. The judgement we make of ourselves should be fair and impartial. It is only then that we can change our value system.

Jesus shows us the way to be in the world without being of the world. When we mould our lives on Him, a new world will open up for us. The Kingdom of Jesus will be ours, and the earth will become our inheritance. That will herald the spiritual revival within us, so greatly needed in the times in which we live. We will be comforted, and have our fill; mercy will be shown to us. Yes, we will be recognised as reflecting Jesus, as the children of God, and will truly see Jesus, not just in an afterlife, but here and now. That is the reward of modelling our lives on the life of Jesus. Let us begin.

Day Thirty-Six in Lent

Who Killed Jesus?

We know the mission Jesus came to accomplish: His substitutionary atonement on the Cross. It was not an ordinary death that He died; it was a premeditated murder. He suffered indignity; He suffered physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Isaiah's prophecy, some seven hundred years before these events, gives us a blow-by-blow account of what Jesus would endure. We read:

"He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth." (Isaiah 53:3–7)

Even while Jesus was experiencing excruciating pain from head to toe, His prayer was:

"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

"Forgive them," said Jesus. Who, I wonder, was Jesus referring to? There were many groups of people around the Cross. Closest to Him would have been the execution party, soldiers of the Roman garrison, coarsened by discipline and cruelty. They had the unspeakable task of nailing a human being to a cross, but perhaps they were the least guilty of all the parties responsible for putting an innocent man to death. After all, they were under the strict instructions of the Roman governor, and to fail to co-operate in the execution would have meant instant death for themselves. Yet they were involved — they crucified the Lord of Glory.

As Jesus prayed His utterly unselfish prayer, "Father, forgive them," His eyes would have taken in other groups: the teachers who hated Him, the priests who bought Him with silver, the traitor who sold Him to them, the crowd who had cried "crucify him" at the farce of a trial He faced.

In the distance was Pilate in his palace, trying to salve his conscience by blaming somebody else for what was happening. But I like to think that Jesus was encompassing a wider body of people than those mentioned: there were His disciples, who had been His constant companions for nearly three years. Had they lifted a finger to prevent this act of barbarism? Perhaps they were not even there; perhaps they stood at a discreet distance — the Gospel accounts tell us that they simply fled.

Standing next to the anonymous disciples of Jesus were those kindly men Nicodemus and Joseph, who were to minister to the dead body of Jesus. Yes, to the dead body of Jesus. As Jesus endured the torture of crucifixion, they failed to make even a token protest against the terrible atrocity being committed — at least, we have no evidence of their doing anything of the kind.

What does this tell us? All these groups, either actively or passively, helped to crucify Jesus — they were all guilty, but in a very real sense they are only representative of a wider number responsible for the murder of Jesus, because the message of the Bible is that it was the sin of the world which crucified Him. The Gospel writers simply wrote, "They crucified Jesus." Who crucified Him? Let me tell you who crucified Him. I did — and you did, and they did, those groups around the Cross. The old song asked the question, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" It is always "they" who crucified the Lord. Yet we were there, and we are still there. It would be truer to say, "We crucified the Lord." Every one of us is equally guilty; "they know not what they do," said Jesus. What a perceptive word this is. Mankind had become so blinded by evil, so corrupted by sin, that it reacted violently to the purity and holiness of God the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. These poor representatives of mankind were swept along by the power of Satan, in seeking to destroy the Lord of Glory — "they know not what they do" — but they did it all the same.

As we approach the end of this period of Lent, let us fall on our knees, and first confess to a murder — the murder of Jesus Christ. Beginning with that confession, we have much more to confess. Confess we must, both you and I; only then will we see the Truth, the light of Jesus, and be able to follow His path.

Day Thirty-Seven in Lent

Mockery at the Point of Death

Have you ever wondered, as I do, that it is always very difficult to interpret what Jesus said and did while He was on this earth? We are right and wrong at the same time. Jesus said to the second malefactor crucified at His side:

“Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

Notice that this was the second statement of Jesus as He hung on the Cross. This statement follows on from the first, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” The first thief simply did not pay attention to that prayer of Jesus, or if he did, he failed to understand what Jesus was all about; rather, I would say he did not want to know Jesus. He was only thinking of getting off the Cross by any means. He therefore said to Jesus:

“If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.” (Luke 23:39)

Paraphrased, it might read, “I know you are pulling a fast one on everyone; you can save neither yourself nor us. I am not even convinced that you can hear our prayers. I know there is nothing you can do for the three of us, so why try?” Can you detect a tinge of mockery in what he said? The fact that the Roman soldiers chose to crucify these two at the same time as Jesus was also a form of mockery.

The second thief was not taking a gamble, but understood who Jesus is. Do not ask me how. It was given to him to know Jesus just at the point of death. He was then no longer troubled about dying. He was eager to be with Jesus in Paradise. I see the crucifixion of these two men on either side of Jesus as part of the grand plan of salvation of God. They appeared nowhere in the narratives until then. We are taught, in no uncertain terms, that we are redeemed at an unimaginable price, and that salvation is ours, if we believe and trust in Jesus.

There are two kinds of response to our suffering. We can indirectly mock God and say, “If you are such a great and powerful and loving God, why am I in this hellish mess? Why me, Lord?” Or we can acknowledge that we are sinners who do not deserve any good thing, and cry out for mercy and help in our time of desperation. The world is full of those who mock God, sometimes unknowingly, in their self-righteousness, presuming that the Creator of the universe is obliged to make their lives smooth. But there are only a few who own up to the fact that Jesus owes us nothing, and that any good that comes our way is due to His mercy, not our merit.

The loving assurance that Jesus chose to give the repentant thief on the Cross — “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” — is the crux of the matter. We must love, admire, trust, and have unwavering faith in Jesus, for that assurance to be our solace when we leave this life behind. Do you recall the last stanza of the song by Jeremy Camp? Let us join together and sing:

“Give me Jesus, give me Jesus. You can have all this world, you can have all this world, you can have all this world — just give me Jesus.”

Day Thirty-Eight in Lent

Three Women, and the Cross

Three women stand out in the biblical narratives: the first, Eve; and the other two, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene. To me, one of them stood at one end of the spectrum, the other two at the other end. But all three played their part in the plan of salvation of God.

It did not take much persuasion or inducement for Eve to become the prime mover in the fall of man. Disobedience to God began with her, alongside her husband Adam. Adam and Eve lacked nothing in the Garden of Eden, which God had provided abundantly. Yet they went for the forbidden fruit. The motive was neither hunger nor the attractiveness of the fruit, but the temptation to be like God. Satan, in the form of a serpent, played his role very cleverly. Satan asked Eve, in Genesis 3:1–5:

“Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:1–5, in part)

She could not resist the temptation to play God, and so mankind embarked upon a journey into sin; she allowed sin to enter humanity, and the progression of sin was swift and unstoppable. The Passion of Jesus began at that very moment, and the Cross was kept ready from then on. I imagine, though not physically, that Eve must have been present at the foot of the Cross, to witness the sin she triggered reaching its culmination in defeat, as Jesus died.

Have you ever experienced a Divine interruption? We all do, at one time or another in a lifetime, an interruption that changes our lives for ever. If we set aside, for a moment, the traditional narrative about Christmas — why God became incarnate in the person of Jesus, and the impact of His life, mission, and death on the Cross, and His Resurrection, upon humankind — and sit instead with the context of Mary’s story, we discover that no one in all of human history has had the sort of Divine interruption that Mary faced and experienced. If we walk faithfully through the pages of Scripture, we find story after story of God’s work in the lives of people, work that interrupts and startles almost every time. But none held the Son of the living God in the way Mary did. Let us focus on Mary, who bore the Divine interruption in her life with grace and great responsibility.

For some traditions, Mary is an afterthought: a means to an end. She is rarely discussed, other than to occupy a figure in the setting of the annual crèche, where she occupies her demure place in biblical history. The dominant understanding of Mary is as a young woman who played the noble role of giving birth to Jesus, God the Son. She is most often represented as poised, quiet, and responsive. She does her duty alongside Joseph. We assume she instructed Jesus in the ways of God as she brought Him up, but we have no biblical details of this. We have a conversation between the mother and Son when Jesus was just twelve years old and went missing for three days. A quick reading might seem to show Jesus talking back to His mother. But I see it as a conversation between a mother and son, both aware of how the life of Jesus would unfold.

Jesus spoke for the third time from the Cross, seeming to entrust His mother, who had stood by Him all along and was now at the foot of the Cross, grief-stricken, to a trusted disciple who was young and dear to Jesus. Scholars have argued that it was John, but we cannot conclude that it was him with any certainty. We read, in John 19:26–27:

“When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.” (John 19:26–27)

He calls her woman, not mother, not out of any disrespect to her, but because “mother” would have been a cutting word to one already wounded with grief. According to A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament, by G. Abbott-Smith, the word “woman”, used to address a female, was “a term of respect and endearment”. Secondly, I want to view the request as a mutual entrusting: of His mother, to someone reliable, and of someone He was fond of, to the care of a mother who knew how to help him grow into a great Apostle.

The third woman, Mary Magdalene, did not run away as others did, but ministered to Jesus as He was dying, and stood firmly at the foot of the Cross. Perhaps she offered her shoulder to Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was inconsolable. Her devotion to her Master came about through the forgiveness she received, which led to her complete transformation. She had no motive other than to worship her Lord and Master. She was at the foot of the Cross at great personal peril. As we come to the early morning of Sunday, she was the first to witness the empty tomb of Jesus, the first to speak with the risen God, and the first to be entrusted with the evangelical task of carrying the good news to others — a reward she could never have dreamed of.

Day Thirty-Nine in Lent

Could God Have Forsaken Himself?

Sin is not unknown to God; sin is not unknown to the believer, nor even to those who have not known Jesus. Sin needs to be dealt with, and an ostrich approach to sin is the most dangerous way of dealing with it.

God hates sin to the fullest extent. The Bible tells us that God is so holy that He cannot even look upon sin, and because He is so holy, God must show people that He is displeased with it. I want to take you on a walk through certain parts of the Bible, and point out for you where God has dealt with sin in the past. So we go back to the Garden of Eden. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve sinned (Genesis 3:23), and God banished both of them from the Garden. God dealt with sin right away. Genesis 6:5 tells us that man's wickedness was so great that He had to flood the earth, wiping away everything except eight people, seven pairs of clean animals, two pairs of unclean animals, and seven pairs of every kind of bird. God dealt with sin once again. Genesis 19:24 reveals to us that the Lord rained down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah. And what we have to realise is that God wiped out everything — not just a couple of buildings, or a house or two, but everything: every person, every animal, every building, plant, and tree. God dealt with sin once more. That was in the past. We read in the book of Revelation that God will open the Lamb's book of life; if a name is not found there, that person will be cast into the lake of fire, known as the second death. That is yet to come.

Man is not ignorant when it comes to understanding sin. Most people may not know the Scriptures concerning sin, but if they do not know the standpoint of the Bible, then they at least know what the law is; and if not the law, then, failing all else, they at least have their conscience. But we have never stopped sinning.

Next, God dealt with sin through God the Son, Jesus Christ. He changed His way of working. He did not wipe out people and nature; instead, He gave Jesus up for us.

Matthew tells us that Jesus cried out:

“Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46)

All of us wonder: did God the Father really “forsake” a sinless Jesus, God the Son? How could God “forsake” Jesus, who humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Philippians 2:8)? Being His own Son — holy, harmless, undefiled, and obedient — God still loved Him. In none of these senses could God have forsaken Him.

Some would like to misquote 2 Corinthians 5:21, which reads:

“For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

and argue that, because He became “sin”, God therefore deserted Him. This cannot be true, because Jesus was God incarnate, not sin incarnate. It is a flawed argument, because Jesus did what He did in complete obedience to God the Father; Jesus did not take on sin in order to become sinful, but took upon Himself the consequences of the sins of humanity, to redeem them, and to give them a chance to repent and stop sinning. Though He grieved to leave His people, He sent His Spirit, God the Holy Spirit, to indwell in us, to convict us, and to be our advocate in Heaven. The death of Christ on the Cross can also be understood in terms of imputation. Our sin was imputed to Christ, such that He became a substitutionary sacrifice, or sin offering, for all who would believe in Him. That put an end to all other forms of “sin offerings”.

Christ cried out to the Father, “why hast thou forsaken me,” so that we would not have to cry out so for eternity. He was teaching us to pray to God not to forsake us. Christ took the weight of sin upon Himself, to pay the debt owed by you and me. And because He was willing to do this, you and I have a chance to enter His Kingdom, to live with the One who was willing to trade places with us.

Finally, we know that Jesus, as God the Son, is God Himself, of the same substance as God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. He could not have condemned Himself. If you believe that, you will know that God did not forsake Him; and if you believe in the Resurrection of Jesus, you will know that God's forsaking Jesus on the Cross would have been a needless act.

Day Forty in Lent

Thirst for the Living Water

In our lifetime, we must each have said "I thirst" a thousand times or more. It is a common condition of the human body. Our bodies need so much water, or liquid, to function properly. If we fail to hydrate our bodies as we should, dehydration sets in, and it can cause us to pass out. Modern conveniences allow people to carry water with them wherever they go — so much so that some feel they must sip water even during an hour-long service in church, sometimes right when a sermon is being preached. I have my own thoughts on that, but that is not today's topic.

The words of Jesus from the Cross, "I thirst," appear only in the Gospel of John. It is the shortest of His seven sayings on the Cross. One of the things we need to understand is that John writes with great depth, and what appears on the surface has much more meaning underneath. We will therefore try to look at the statement from three perspectives.

First, Jesus suffered in His nature as an ordinary man. He was offered, as recorded in John 19:29, a sponge with sour wine put on hyssop. Jesus was offered wine three times on the day of His death. The first time was while He was carrying the Cross, recorded for us in Mark and Matthew. In Matthew's Gospel, He is offered a cup of wine mixed with gall, which probably would have acted as a poison, or a strong anaesthetic. I suspect, though the Gospel accounts do not mention this, that ingredients were secretly mixed in to speed His death and limit His pain and suffering. Amid such extreme cruelty, we see an act of compassion, because crucifixion was a long, slow, painful death. But Jesus tastes the wine, and refuses to drink it. Why? Because He was not just to die on the Cross for the sins of the world, but to suffer for them as well. In this refusal, we see how costly the price of sin really is.

Second, looking beyond the obvious, we know that those who drink the water He gives will never thirst. Rather, the water will become in the person a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life (John 4:14). Further, he who believes in Him shall never thirst, and out of his heart will flow rivers of living water (John 7:38). I refuse to believe that Jesus, who is the living water, thirsted for a drink.

I believe that, though in a short burst, Jesus was telling us of His real thirst: His task, a longing He had carried through the centuries, to reconcile Himself with His estranged people. He was thirsting for mankind to be filled with the Spirit of God, and to be saved. He was thirsting so that the redeemed would never thirst again.

The third perspective is the fulfilment of the Scriptures. After all, Jesus was the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies. John reports, in chapter nineteen, verse twenty-eight:

"After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst." (John 19:28)

David wrote, in Psalm 69:19–21:

"Thou hast known my reproach, and my shame, and my dishonour: mine adversaries are all before thee. Reproach hath broken my heart; and I am full of heaviness: and I looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none. They gave me also gall for my meat; and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." (Psalm 69:19–21)

Have you noticed that they put the sponge on hyssop? This too has significance. Hyssop was used to sprinkle blood on the doorposts and lintels at the first Passover (Exodus 12:22). It was associated with purification and sacrifice in the tabernacle (Leviticus 14:4, 6; Numbers 19:6, 18). No doubt John had this in mind when he wrote his account of the Gospel.

I stop here with a prayer in my heart, that our merciful Lord and Saviour may offer us, on hyssop, the living water He offered the Samaritan woman at the well, and quench our spiritual thirst. Without His spring of water within us, we will wither, and be like dead wood, even if we continue to breathe for a while. May our forgiving Lord cleanse us, as He did in the Temple, and refresh our inner selves with a fresh outpouring of His Holy Spirit.

Day Forty-One in Lent

“It Is Finished”

As some would interpret it, the cry of Jesus, “It is finished!” on the Cross did not mean that He was finished. The joyous cry on Sunday is, “He is risen!” The power of death has been conquered by the far greater power of life. The empty tomb of the Lord is not a place of despair and defeat. That empty tomb is a place of glory, a place of power, and a place of hope and life.

Every Christian knows that Jesus said, “It is finished,” while He was upon the Cross, but what did He actually mean by these words? What is finished? Some believe that this statement proves that God’s work to save mankind was completely finished, and that He would perform no further work of salvation; others say that, by these words, our Lord Jesus meant only that His great work of redemption was finished, not that God would perform no further work of salvation after that.

I have always argued that the Passion of Christ began in the Garden of Eden, when man grieved Him with disobedience. For centuries He carried the weight of the curse of eternal death upon man, a death that was final, and led to hell. Nothing that God did made man stop sinning. On the contrary, the nature and scale of sin took on ever more grievous dimensions. When the time came, God became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, with a twofold objective: to provide mankind with a roadmap and a value system for our life on earth, through His teaching and ministry, and to die a substitutionary, sacrificial death, to release man from the curse of eternal death. At the point of His death on the Cross, He was satisfied that He had met both these objectives, and declared, “It is finished.”

God is holy, and His disposition is righteous, and His Kingdom permits no unclean person to enter. If we have only had our sins forgiven, and our inner sinful nature has not been uprooted, and we remain capable of committing sin and resisting God, then we will be unqualified to meet God face to face, or to enter His Kingdom. But God is a merciful God, and wants to give us every opportunity to be converted from within. We now see the meaning of why Jesus said:

“I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.” (John 16:12–13)

Having finished the task of becoming a sin offering for the whole human race, and thereby releasing all who confess their sins and seek forgiveness from eternal death, Jesus continues His work of salvation through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Day Forty-Two in Lent

Was the Centurion’s Reaction Futile?

Luke reports, in Luke 23:47–48:

“Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man. And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned.” (Luke 23:47–48)

I must say that they had to witness a sign in order to believe the Truth. We need to look back to Luke 23:44–46, to understand why the centurion made that declaration. Let us read:

“And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst. And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.” (Luke 23:44–46)

That was the seventh saying of Jesus from the Cross.

We will come to it shortly. But let us not simply dismiss the centurion, and all those who beat their breasts as they returned from the Cross, lamenting the folly they had committed. Let us go back to the second saying of Jesus, to the malefactor crucified on one side of Him. He would be with Jesus in His Kingdom when Jesus died, fulfilling the promise Jesus made, saying:

“Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

That was a promise to the entire human race. Anyone confessing Jesus as Saviour would be saved. The centurion and the crowd did that, though somewhat late. I am of the view that all of them would be saved at the appointed time. Therefore, before we move on, let us not waste time, but confess.

I repeat our Lord’s last saying, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” It may sound a little strange for God to entrust His Spirit to Himself. The concept of the Trinity had not yet been articulated then, but we understand it now. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit revolve in and out of one another in an eternal circle. I see these sayings of Jesus as an eternal continuation of this mysterious but divine cycle — for a moment out, and the next moment in. Let me repeat here a statement I often make: the Cross is an event between the Father and the Son (now we know the Holy Spirit too), and what transpired on this side of the Cross, and on the other, will remain a Divine Mystery.

Jesus could have achieved this without articulating it as He did. My own view is that there had to be a dead body for burial, and a body dies only when the spirit departs from it. A body had to be buried, to be evidence of the Resurrection. In making that final statement, He was saying, if I may paraphrase it — Jesus forgive me if I misstate anything — “Omnipresent as I am, I am letting my Spirit leave its hitherto temporal housing, the body. Take it, and bury it. I am eager to appear before you in a glorified state, as I promised you: a foretaste of what you will be like in my Kingdom, in my new creation.”

May our Lord open our hearts and minds, and grant us the wisdom to perceive the Truth.