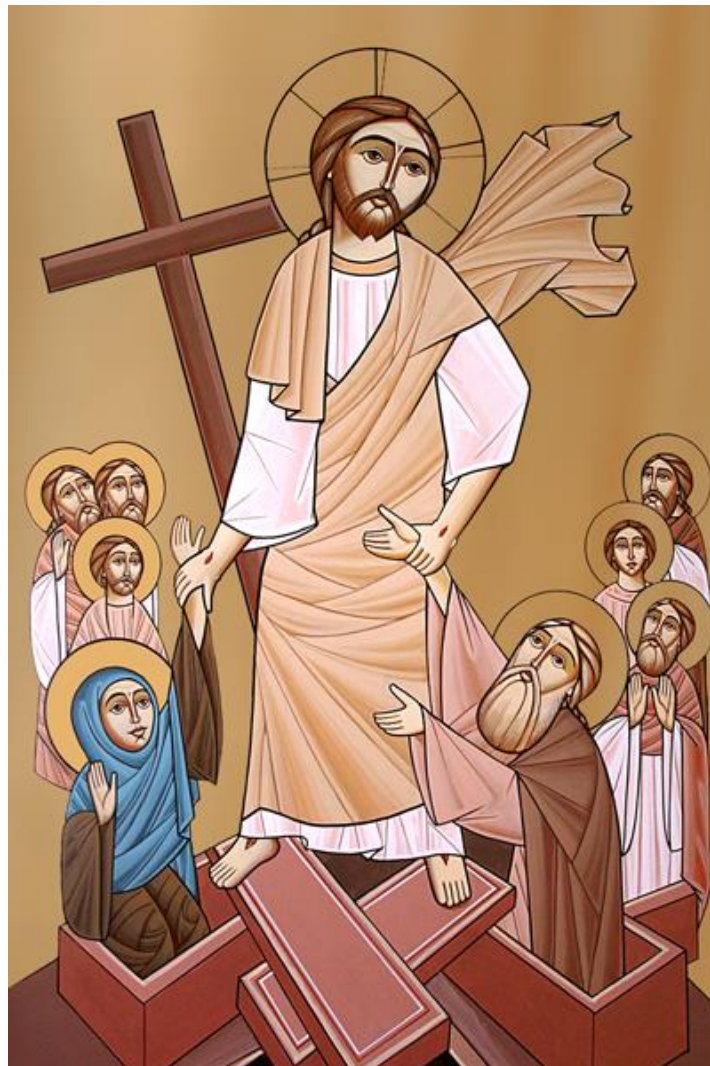




## Ecumenical Lenten Resource 2016

### 'Return to God: *Divine Grace and Human Struggle*'



'Return to God: *divine grace and human struggle*' offers 6 sessions, focusing on a range of Gospels during the Lenten season, and includes prayer, icons, art, time for sharing, and encouragement for action in daily life, with reflections from the lived experience of being Roman Catholic, Coptic Orthodox and Protestant.

Above is a beautiful Coptic Icon, written by the late Coptic Iconographer, Isaac Fanous [1919-2007]. It shows our Lord Jesus taking Adam and Eve out of Hades. When Jesus died on the cross, His human soul went down to Hades like all human souls. But because Jesus' soul was united to His divinity, it was impossible for Hades to capture it [Acts 2:31].

Rather, he freed the righteous souls which repented and died in the hope of the coming of the Messiah. This is related to our theme, because repentance itself cannot free us from corruption without God's saving act and grace, even though human part remains necessary.

# INTRODUCTION

In 2016, the Western Church celebrates Easter on 27 March 2016 and the Orthodox Church celebrates Easter on 1 May 2016. Lent for the Western Church begins on Ash Wednesday 10 February 2016, and Monday 14 March 2016 is the beginning of the Great Lent in the Orthodox Church. As such, groups may be starting any time from early February through to mid-March, and ending from end of March to the end of April.

## ***Lent – Easter – Pentecost 2016***

	<b>Western</b>	<b>Orthodox</b>
<i><b>Lent Begins</b></i>	<i>Ash Wednesday</i> 10 February 2016	<i>Beginning of Great Lent</i> 14 March 2016
<i><b>Easter Sunday</b></i>	27 March 2016	1 May 2016
<i><b>Pentecost</b></i>	15 May 2016	19 June 2016

Note: In 2017 Christians from all traditions will celebrate **Easter** on the same day - 16 April. The two dates coincide when the full moon following the equinox comes so late that it counts as the first full moon after 21 March in the Julian calendar as well as the Gregorian. For more information please visit: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/frequently-asked-questions-about-the-date-of-easter>

## **Content**

This Ecumenical Lenten Resource for 2016 is grounded in the **Gospels** that will be proclaimed in the Roman Catholic Church and in the Coptic Orthodox Church for each Sunday during Lent/the Great Lent.

Many will find that the Roman Catholic Gospel is the same one that is read in many Protestant Churches in this time. For some others, it will be a different Gospel that is chosen.

We rejoice in this diverse listening to the Word of God, and recognise that this diversity will add to the conversations as groups gather during Lent.

Each of the two selected Gospels is followed by suggested **Reflections**, offering overall three different perspectives, drawn from the lived experience of being Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant.

**Icons and images** are also included, and we invite you to reflect on them. You may find the notes regarding *Icons in the Orthodox Church* and *Icons: Glimpses of Eternity* helpful [page 6].

Likewise, you may wish to use *Visio Divina* [page 7]. *Visio Divina* means praying with images, or using an image as a focal point for prayer, in order that we might open ourselves further to receive the Word of God. Some notes regarding *Lectio Divina* [page 8] are also included for those who wish to use that form.

There are 6 sessions, focusing on a range of Gospels during the Lenten season, and including prayer, icons, art, time for sharing, and encouragement for action in daily life.

We suggest each last around 1½ hours to enable slow meditative reading of the Gospels, and sharing through prayer, reflection and conversation.

SA Council of Churches hopes that groups will be diverse and will learn from the sharing in the gathering.

Especially we encourage you to use the resource imaginatively and in ways that open up conversation and reflection, making space for sharing new insights about the individual and community 'Return to God: *divine grace and human struggle*'

+

### **Acknowledgements**

'Return to God: *divine grace and human struggle*' has been prepared by a Working Team from South Australian Council of Churches Ecumenical Learning Committee:

Mary Camilleri, Staff Spiritual and Religious Formation, Catholic Education SA

Heshmat Keroloss, Theologian, Coptic Orthodox Church

Ted Wright, Part Time Lecturer, Catherine Booth College, Salvation Army

with assistance from John Littleton, Anglican Diocese of Adelaide and Convenor of SACC Ecumenical Learning Committee, together Martine Hawkes [layout], and Melanie Macrow and Geraldine Hawkes, SA Council of Churches.

All images in this resource appear with acknowledgement or attribution, are reproduced here with either kind permission or exist within the public domain.

4 November 2015

South Australian Council of Churches, 65 Flinders Street, Adelaide SA 5000  
Ph: +618 8215 0300 | E: [sacc@picknowl.com.au](mailto:sacc@picknowl.com.au) | [www.sacc.asn.au](http://www.sacc.asn.au)

# Overview of the Sunday Gospel Readings during Lent/the Great Lent 2016

## a. Roman Catholic Church

The Liturgy of the Hours is the richest single prayer resource of the Christian Church, with prayers, psalms and readings for each of the Hours, changing each day and through the seasons.

Scripture readings are available in the Catholic *Lectionary for Mass*, where it is easy to obtain an overview of all the readings used in a particular liturgical season (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter) and/or in a particular year of Ordinary Time (Sundays in Years A, B, C; Weekdays in Years I & II).

There is normally an intentional thematic connection between the *Gospel* & the Psalm.

The Gospel readings for Lent are arranged as follows:

- The **first and second Sundays** maintain the accounts of the Temptation and Transfiguration of the Lord, with readings, however, from all three Synoptics.
- On **the next three Sundays**, the Gospels about the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus have been restored in **Year A**. Because these Gospels are of major importance in regard to Christian initiation, they may also be read in Year B and Year C, especially in places where there are catechumens.
- Other texts, however, are provided for Year B and Year C: for **Year B**, a text from John about Christ's coming glorification through his Cross and Resurrection, and for **Year C**, a text from Luke about conversion.
- On **Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion** the texts for the procession are selections from the Synoptic Gospels concerning the Lord's solemn entry into Jerusalem. For the Mass the reading is the account of the Lord's Passion.  
(*Lectionary for Mass*, "Introduction," chap. 5)

## b. Coptic Orthodox Church

The main concern of the Church during the Great Lent is *repentance and return to God*. This is done through human willingness and God's grace. The interaction between human part and divine part, human willingness and effort, and God's grace (synergia) is essential.

Two weeks before the Great Lent, the Church fasts for three days called "*the fast of Nineveh*", in commemoration of the fast and repentance of the people of Nineveh (the book of Jonah).

There is then a preparatory week before the forty days of the Great Lent. The Gospel of this week is Matthew 6:1-18 on *almsgiving, prayer and fasting* because through these three practices one gets out of one's self and recognises the other, which is an important part of repentance and return to God, which is the main concern of the Great Lent.

## c. Your Sunday Gospel

Each week we encourage all to share whatever Gospel is to be read on the following Sunday and to consider also how is it selected...what themes are apparent... does it connect with other parts of the Sunday Worship?

## Sunday Gospels used in this Lenten Resource

	Roman Catholic	Coptic Orthodox	Your Sunday Gospel
<b>Week 1</b>	Luke 4:1-13	Matthew 6:19-33	
<b>Week 2</b>	Luke: 9:28b-36	Matthew 4:1-11	
<b>Week 3</b>	Luke: 13: 1-9	Luke 15:11-32	
<b>Week 4</b>	Luke: 15:1-3, 11-32	John 4:1-42	
<b>Week 5</b>	John: 8:1-11	John 5:1-18	
<b>Week 6</b>	Luke 22:14 to 23:56	John 9:1-41	

## Icons in the Orthodox Church

+

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, THE SON  
& THE HOLY SPIRIT ONE GOD AMEN

6

Icons in the Church are not just Religious Art, but have **theological, spiritual, and educational** significance.

*Theologically*, icons are based on the doctrine of the Incarnation of the Son of God, in Whom we have seen and touched God.

*“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life – the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us – that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.” [1Jn 1:1-4]*

*“No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” [Jn 1:18]*

Every time we look at icons, touch, and kiss them, we commemorate the mystery of the Logos who became flesh and dwelt among us [Jn 1:14], God who appeared in flesh,

*“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh”*  
[1Tim 3:16]

*Spiritually*, the icons of our Lord Jesus Christ, St Mary, the martyrs, and the saints represent the presence of our Lord and the saints in the church, especially during the Divine Liturgy. This fact was manifested to many righteous persons throughout time to whom Christ, angels and the saints have appeared during the Liturgy.

*Educationally*, icons portray the main figures and events of salvation which help the believer in their spiritual life, that they may be inspired by them.

*From a resource prepared by St Mary and Anba Bishoy Coptic Orthodox Church, South Australia*

### Icons: Glimpses of Eternity

The icon was also seen as "theological language in colour" highlighting the sacredness of created matter.

Now, as windows on eternity, icons are theological "symbols" not only pointing forward towards future or transcendent realities, but actually directly participating in these as well.

Mr Philip Kariatlis, St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College

For more information please visit: <http://www.greekorthodox.org.au/general/orthodoxchristianity/icons>

## Visio Divina #1



Visio Divina means praying with images, or using an image as a focal point for prayer, in order that we might open ourselves further to receive the Word of God.

1. Sit with the picture. Explore it from the bottom up. Allow it to speak to your life at this moment.
2. You are invited to *see* all there is to see, exploring the entirety of the image. Look deeply, beyond first and second impressions, below initial ideas, judgments, or understandings. You are invited to be seen, addressed, surprised, and transformed by God who is never limited or tied to any image, but speaks through them. Explore the image slowly, taking your time to let feelings and thoughts come to you as you take in forms, figures, colours, lines, textures and shapes.
3. When you are ready ...
  - a. What does it look like, or remind you of?
  - b. What do you find yourself drawn to?
  - c. What do you like and not like?
  - d. What are your initial thoughts?
  - e. What feelings are evoked?
4. Return to the image with an open heart and open mind. Be aware of your response and ponder prayerfully what this response means for you and how it is directly connected to your life?
5. You might like to jot down in a journal or whatever way is most helpful for you the insights you want to remember, actions you are invited to take, wisdom you hope to embody, or any feelings or thoughts you wish to express.
6. Bring your prayer to a close by resting in God's grace and love.

**OR**

## Visio Divina #2

God speaks to us in many ways—through relationships, our experiences, sacred texts such as the Bible and many more. Visio divina, Latin for *divine seeing*, is praying with images to listen to God's words. Like lectio divina, Latin for *divine reading*, Visio divina has four steps:

1. Read the text (in this case art) slowly, taking a first glance noting the colors, people, places and things. Remain with the image for one to two minutes. If you would like, jot down a few words about the image.
2. Take a second, deeper, look. Where is there movement? What relationships do you see? Engage your imagination. Where are you in the artwork? What do you see from that perspective? What deeper meaning emerges?
3. Respond to the image with prayer. Did the image remind you of an experience, person or issue for which you'd like to offer thanksgiving or intercession? Offer that prayer to God.
4. Find your quiet centre. Breathe deeply. Relax your shoulders, arms and legs. Rest in this quiet. Let God pray in you. God prays beyond words.

## Lectio Divina

*Lectio Divina* [Latin] means sacred or divine reading and is a prayerful reading of Scripture.

The following is a suggested way of *Lectio Divina*.

One person from the group could slowly read the passage from the selected Gospel, and then another slowly repeat it.

Is there a word or phrase that jumps out at you or grabs your attention?

Write down that word or phrase.

Take five minutes to quietly savour this phrase.

You might find it helpful to repeat the phrase silently to yourself.

What you are seeking to do is to allow the phrase to rest quietly in your heart.

At the end of five minutes, take a further five minutes to consider what this phrase or word might mean for your life. You could write down something you will do in response to this reflection.

Or you may prepare a word or two of prayer for the grace to change your disposition or behaviour.

Group members might like to share with one another some thoughts arising from this time of prayer.



## Week 1 of Lent/the Great Lent

### 1. Gathering & Prayer

- Introductions to one another and any expressions of hope for your journey through Lent/the Great Lent.
- Opening Prayer, giving thanks for the insights and asking that our hearts may remain open to returning more fully to God.

### 2. Sunday Gospels & Reflections

#### Roman Catholic

Theme: The Temptation of Jesus: Filled by the Holy Spirit, Jesus was led by the Spirit through the wilderness where he was tempted.

Psalm 90: Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble.

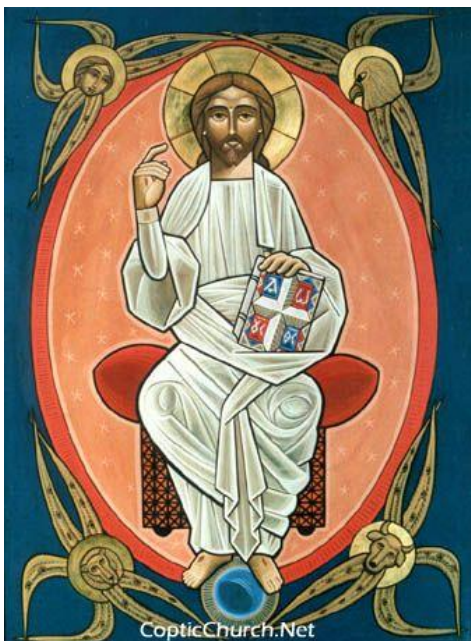
Gospel: Luke 4:1-13

#### *Reflection:*

God's mercy is offered to all of us. We seek not to test whether God loves us but to love God wholeheartedly and unconditionally; we are to remain faithful no matter what hardships may test us. Repentance is expressed in giving to God what belongs to God and we are reminded that repentance encompasses, mind, heart and practice.



Ivan Kramskoy / 'Christ in the Wilderness' / Public Domain



Jesus Christ / CopticChurch.Net

#### Coptic Orthodox

Theme: The Treasures Sunday

Gospel: Matthew 6:19-33 Key verses 19, 33

#### *Reflection:*

Jesus' teaching on laying up treasure in heaven follows his teaching on the attitude and motivation for almsgiving.

- What is your greatest treasure?
- What priorities are expressed in the way that you use your treasure?
- What is your motivation for giving to God?
- Is this gospel reading only concerned with financial treasures?

*"All is vanity."* We read this sentence five times in the book of Ecclesiastes as Qoheleth the teacher or preacher reflects on life.

As we reflect on our lives, what is really important? Listen to people around you. What do they talk about? Is it financial matters? Is it a career achievement? Is it some new acquisition? Is it the success of sporting teams? As you listen, you come to understand what is important to them. How would our conversation change if Jesus were physically present?

Jesus was actually quite clear about life priorities. It was not earthly wealth, but heavenly treasure. It was not the dark, unhealthy stimuli of the earthly world, but the light, healthy stimuli of his world. It was not even a life of vacillation between this world and his, but an absolute focus on his, a whole hearted devotion to him and his kingdom.

What does your life say about your priorities? Is it summed up in Bernie Taupin's lyrics to the Elton John song *"Candle in the wind"*?

*And it seems to me you lived your life  
Like a candle in the wind  
Never knowing who to cling to  
When the rain set in*

Or does your life reflect the conclusion of Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes 12:13, *"The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone."*

Jesus gave us clear direction about life priorities in his Gethsemane prayer, *"Not my will but yours be done."* (Luke 22:42)

### 3. Closing Prayer

In silence, choose one feature from the time together and pray from it. Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something that God thinks is particularly important.

This may involve a feeling - encouraging or discouraging. It may be a word or gesture that has significance for you. Or it may be something that is emerging that seemed at the time rather insignificant. Look at it. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart - whether of intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.



*'Giving Heart' / CC-BY-SA-3.0*

Some people may choose to share a word, or an insight, or a prayer: others may prefer to remain silent.

*Together:* In all we are and in all we do, let us give glory to the Father, Son and Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen.

You may wish to offer one other a sign of peace as this time draws to a close.

## Week 2 of Lent/the Great Lent

### 1. Gathering & Prayer

- Take a few moments to recall the previous session. What particularly touched you? What new insight about the human struggle, or divine grace, did you receive? Share as you wish.
- Opening Prayer, giving thanks for the insights and asking that our hearts may remain open to returning more fully to God.

### 2. Sunday Gospels & Reflections

#### Roman Catholic

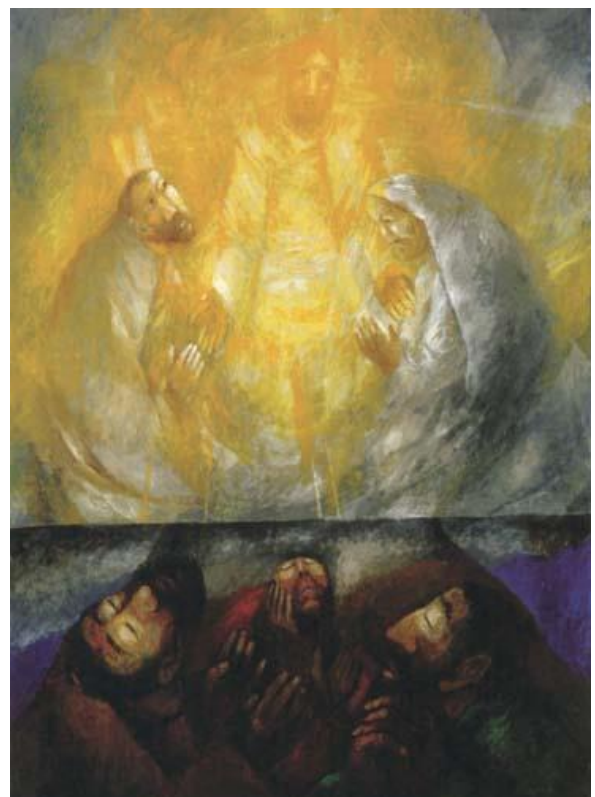
Theme: The Transfiguration: As Jesus prayed, the aspect of his face was changed, and his clothing became brilliant as lightning.

Psalm 26: The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Gospel: Luke: 9:28b-36

#### *Reflection:*

We must all be led up the mountain to the place that gives us larger horizons and deeper hearts. Unless we concentrate on finding God, on letting ourselves be overshadowed by the cloud and on listening to the word, we will be oblivious of whose presence we are in and who seeks to draw us into friendship with God. In gratitude we grow in understanding. We awaken and see the glory of God in Jesus.



Sieger Köder / 'The Transfiguration of Christ' / Public Domain

#### Coptic Orthodox

Theme: The Temptation Sunday

Gospel: Matthew 4:1-11

#### *Reflection:*

Once one takes one's spiritual life seriously, one will definitely face the devil's temptations. In Christ we will conquer as He conquered.

- What is your greatest temptation?
- What is the basis of that temptation?
- What does your strategy for dealing with temptation look like?
- Is your strategy based on human strength as in Genesis 3 or on God's strength?



Duccio / 'The Temptation on the Mount' / Public Domain

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. (Heb 4:15-16)*

Once one takes one's spiritual life seriously, one will definitely face the devil's temptations. In Christ we will conquer as He conquered. (Heshmat Keroloss)

It is interesting to draw some comparisons between the temptation and fall off humankind in Genesis 3 and the temptation and victory of Jesus in Matthew 4.

Humankind was tempted in a luxuriant garden with an abundance of food. Jesus was tested in the desert suffering hunger.

Both were tempted with the allure of aggrandisement, of being the centre of life in lieu of centring their lives God and his commands.

Humankind's temptation involved a distortion of God's command. Jesus' temptation involved scripture, accurately stated, but completely out of context. Humankind's rebuttal of this involved adding to God's command. Jesus' rebuttal faithfully quoted God's word.

To me, the most significant difference in the two situations is the issue of relationship. The Genesis account uses the word *Elohim* in referring to God, quite at odds with the surrounding text that uses the word *Yahweh*. *Elohim* is a majestic portrayal of God rather than an intimate relational portrayal of God using the word *Yahweh*. On each occasion where Jesus responds from scripture, the Old Testament text uses the word *Yahweh*. This focus on relationship with God is the key to overcoming temptation.

We can be assured of temptation, but we can be assured of overcoming temptation.

### 3. Closing Prayer

In silence, choose one feature from the time together and pray from it. Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something that God thinks is particularly important.

This may involve a feeling - encouraging or discouraging. It may be a word or gesture that has significance for you. Or it may be something that is emerging that seemed at the time rather insignificant. Look at it. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart - whether of intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.



Some people may choose to share a word, or an insight, or a prayer: others may prefer to remain silent.

*Together:* In all we are and in all we do, let us give glory to the Father, Son and Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen.

You may wish to offer one other a sign of peace as this time draws to a close.

## Week 3 of Lent/the Great Lent

### 1. Gathering & Prayer

- Take a few moments to recall the previous session. What particularly touched you? What new insight about the human struggle, or divine grace, did you receive? Share as you wish.
- Opening Prayer, giving thanks for the insights and asking that our hearts may remain open to returning more fully to God.

### 2. Sunday Gospels & Reflections



Georgie Sharp / 'Tree at Sunrise' /  
Reproduced with kind permission of Mary Camilleri

#### Roman Catholic

Theme: Parable of the Barren Fig Tree  
Unless we repent we will all perish as they did.

Psalm 102: The Lord is kind and merciful.

Gospel: Luke: 13: 1-9

#### *Reflection:*

We are to reform our lives, to be a people of ongoing conversion, to radical change, to turn back towards God. Jesus presents us with a warning, an examination of conscience and a chance to choose where we stand and what we think we are according to God's criteria. We must listen and feel with God the agony of those who suffer and then we are to do penance, fast, give alms and work mightily for justice.

#### Coptic Orthodox

Theme: The Prodigal Son

Gospel: Luke 15:11-32

#### *Reflection:*

This is the first example the Church sets for us of repentance: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of you hired servants" (v19). God is a Father who is ready and willing to forgive His repentant son when he returns to Him in true humility.

- How do you understand the word repentance?
- How do you understand the word forgiveness?
- Are you worthy of God's forgiveness?
- In what ways do you demonstrate the forgiveness of God in your life?



'The Icon of Repentance/Prodigal Son' (detail) / Public Domain

*What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?  
Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early. (Hosea 6:4)*

Can't you just feel the cry of anguish in these verses as God weeps for his people who have rejected him and prostituted themselves to other gods, as Hosea's wife Gomer had left him to live as a prostitute?

Can't you just feel the anguish of the father in the parable of the prodigal son, a parable that some scholars interpret as a metaphor of the rejection of God by his chosen people, as he feels the pain of separation from his son?

Having not only rejected his father, but in asking for his share of the inheritance wished that his father were dead, the son has humiliated his father. Can you imagine the father's pain?

Can you also imagine the depths of despair to which the son has sunk, working with unclean animals? Can you imagine the depths of despair of the son in coming to the realisation that he is no longer worthy to be called his father's son?

But being worthy and earning the father's forgiveness is not part of Jesus' message. It certainly was an attitude of the younger brother and is the attitude of many church goers today. But Jesus' message is one that portrays the father as ever loving, eagerly awaiting to receive his people again. In fact, as the father runs to greet the returning son in a manner that was clearly undignified, even humiliating for himself to the Jewish way of thinking. Like Hosea did in redeeming Gomer, he does away with all outward appearances of respectability, and expresses his joy at the reconciliation.

What a wonderful promise that no matter how far we have distanced ourselves from God, no matter how unworthy of his love we have become, God patiently, even anxiously, awaits our return to him and responds so lavishly in his amazing grace.

### **3. Closing Prayer**

In silence, choose one feature from the time together and pray from it. Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something that God thinks is particularly important.

This may involve a feeling - encouraging or discouraging. It may be a word or gesture that has significance for you. Or it may be something that is emerging that seemed at the time rather insignificant. Look at it. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart - whether of intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.

Some people may choose to share a word, or an insight, or a prayer: others may prefer to remain silent.

*Together:* In all we are and in all we do, let us give glory to the Father, Son and Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen.

You may wish to offer one other a sign of peace as this time draws to a close.

## Week 4 of Lent/the Great Lent

### 1. Gathering & Prayer

- Take a few moments to recall the previous session. What particularly touched you? What new insight about the human struggle, or divine grace, did you receive?
- Opening Prayer, giving thanks for one another and asking that our hearts may remain open to returning more fully to God.

### 2. Sunday Gospels & Reflections

#### Roman Catholic

Theme: Parable of the Prodigal Son  
Your brother was dead and has come to life.

Psalm 33: Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Gospel: Luke: 15:1-3, 11-32



Charlie Mackesy / 'Prodigal Daughter' / © Charlie Mackesy 2015

#### *Reflection:*

This is *Laetare* Sunday, a time for rejoicing as we are reminded of the mercy and forgiveness of God. In the parable we learn that God does not hold our transgressions against us but reconciles us to Godself and then graciously gives us the message of reconciliation to give to others. It reveals the hardness of our hearts and calls us to atone, restore and repair. The relationship of the sons to the father is the vertical dimension of the cross; and the relationship of the brothers to each other is the horizontal dimension. A gap in either dimension reveals those who take God's mercy for granted. Each one of us needs forgiveness, more than we know or wish to acknowledge. We rejoice in the grace of God.

#### Coptic Orthodox

Theme: The Samaritan Woman

Gospel: John 4:1-42

#### *Reflection:*

Christ is ready to offer "the living water", the gift of God to the thirsty soul that misses the mark in seeking her joy and rest.

- What aspects of the Samaritan Woman's encounter with Jesus particularly stand out for you:
  - Confrontation?
  - Confusion?
  - Clarification?



- How would you compare your encounters with the presence of Jesus with the Samaritan Woman's encounter?
- How have you responded to the offer of living water?

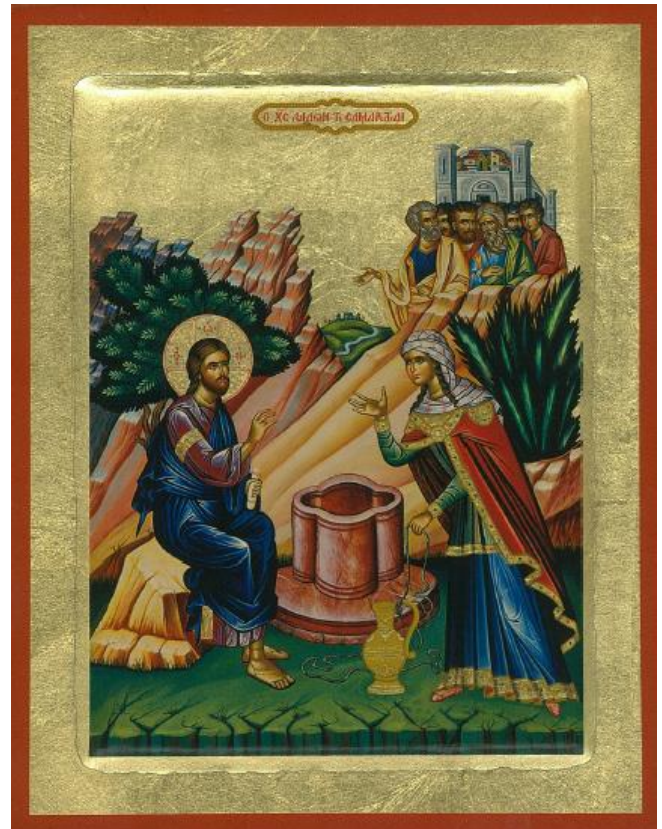
### Reflections on the Coptic Orthodox Gospel from a Protestant perspective

One can hardly imagine that going about one's daily business, drawing water from a well, in a way that would minimise the chance of an encounter with others, in the midday sun, would lead to an encounter that would be a crossroad experience, an experience that would involve confrontation, confusion and clarification. The confrontation is totally unexpected as Jesus breaks the social conventions of the day and speaks to not only a Samaritan, not only a Samaritan woman, but a Samaritan woman who is living a lifestyle at odds with the Mosaic Law! Clearly the Samaritan woman is uncomfortable and as we read, we can just empathise with her as she tries to end this encounter.

In doing this, the conversations becomes confused with the woman focussing on the everyday physical meaning of Jesus' words in an attempt, maybe a deliberate attempt to avoid facing the spiritual issues about which Jesus is speaking.

And yet we get the impression that Jesus' insight into this woman's life and his persistence is both convincing and convicting.

At this stage, the Samaritan woman gains clarification of her reality and responds, not just in the way that the prodigal son responded, but with gratitude and witnessing to the presence of the Messiah, and the reality of his provision of "living water" that is both satisfying and eternal.



Fr. Iostinos (iconographer) / 'Woman at the Well, Nablus Sunrise  
/ Reproduced with kind permission of Mary Camilleri

### 3. Closing Prayer

In silence, choose one feature from the time together and pray from it. Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something that God thinks is particularly important.

This may involve a feeling - encouraging or discouraging. It may be a word or gesture that has significance for you. Or it may be something that is emerging that seemed at the time rather insignificant. Look at it. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart - whether of intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.

Some people may choose to share a word, or an insight, or a prayer: others may prefer to remain silent.

*Together:* In all we are and in all we do, let us give glory to the Father, Son and Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen.

You may wish to offer one other a sign of peace as this time draws to a close.

### 1. Gathering & Prayer

- Take a few moments to recall the previous session. What particularly touched you? What new insight about the human struggle, or divine grace, did you receive? Share as you wish.
- Opening Prayer, giving thanks for the insights and asking that our hearts may remain open to returning more fully to God.

### 2. Sunday Gospels & Reflections

#### Roman Catholic

Theme: The Woman Caught in Adultery  
Let the person without sin be the first to throw a stone.

Psalm 125 The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Gospel: John: 8:1-11



C. Highorn / 'Woman Caught in Adultery' / Public Domain

#### *Reflection:*

We should not dwell on what's behind us, rather we should look to what lies ahead. There is no condemnation from God for what we have done or failed to do, only an exhortation to go our way, the way of the cross, and turn towards resurrection and new life. We are all sinners and it is time to be formed in the pattern of Jesus; death, so that we may arrive at life. The story of the woman caught in adultery shows us how to celebrate forgiveness, reconciliation and penance in the community. Sin and forgiveness are never just private or personal affairs.

#### Coptic Orthodox

Theme: The Paralytic Man

Gospel: John 5:1-18

#### *Reflection:*

Christ heals the sick soul who seems to be hopeless finding no one to help him. Jesus warns against return to sin again (v14).

- Was the Paralytic man without help?
- Why would Jesus ask the Paralytic Man if he wanted to be healed?
- What impact would Jesus' healing have on this man's life?
  - Think of the positive aspects that would ensue.
  - Think of the challenges that would ensue.
- Do you want to be made well?



Timothy Shmalz / 'The homeless Jesus' (sculpture) / © Timothy P. Shmalz 2012

### **Reflections on the Coptic Orthodox Gospel from a Protestant perspective**

*Do you want to be made well?* (John 5:6b)

What a strange question to ask one who had been ill for thirty eight years, unable to move or care for himself. Or is it?

We all know people who experience poor health, or perhaps even enjoy poor health. It provides a topic of conversation. It provides a focus for life – poor me! It provides an excuse for languishing in a dependency mode of life. It provides an excuse for abrogation of responsibility. Or is this unjustly critical of people who do experience poor health?

Why then did Jesus ask this question of the man, “Do you want to be made well?”

As a person unable to care for himself, this man could depend on others to meet his essential needs. In fact, when Jesus challenged him with this question, he avoided answering and merely responded in a way that emphasized his pitiful plight and his dependence on others. To be made well would lead to a whole new life of work and responsibility for himself and his life. Was this the reason for Jesus' question?

Then Jesus intervened in a way that encouraged him, maybe commanded him to act and be healed. Jesus had provided the means for healing, but that means required a response from the man. The healing resulted from a combination of grace and cooperation, not grace and coercion.

This was not quite the end of the matter as in verse 14 we see Jesus again speaking with the man, commanding him to sin no more, a continuation of his response to the grace provided.

How committed are we to being healed by Jesus and continuing in that new healthy state? Clearly God is available and desirous of our healing. It is in his very grace filled nature, but we have a choice about responding to his healing grace, initially and continually.

### 3. Closing Prayer

In silence, choose one feature from the time together and pray from it. Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something that God thinks is particularly important.

This may involve a feeling - encouraging or discouraging. It may be a word or gesture that has significance for you. Or it may be something that is emerging that seemed at the time rather insignificant. Look at it. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart - whether of intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.

Some people may choose to share a word, or an insight, or a prayer: others may prefer to remain silent.

*Together:* In all we are and in all we do, let us give glory to the Father, Son and Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen.

You may wish to offer one other a sign of peace as this time draws to a close.



### 1. Gathering & Prayer

- Take a few moments to recall the previous session. What particularly touched you? What new insight about the human struggle, or divine grace, did you receive? Share as you wish.
- Opening Prayer, giving thanks for the insights and asking that our hearts may remain open to returning more fully to God.

### 2. Sunday Gospels & Reflections

#### **Roman Catholic:** Passion Sunday

Theme: The Passion of Jesus

Psalm 21: My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

Gospel: Luke 22:14 to 23:56



'Anastasis' / Panel from a Roman sarcophagus / ca. 350 CE.

#### *Reflection:*

The Passion begins with the Passover meal, the Eucharist. The context of the meal is suffering, loss and betrayal. Jesus prays for courage, acceptance and endurance, and he reminds those who sleep – and that are still unaware of the struggle for good and evil – to pray that they will not be subjected to the trial or succumb to it.

Jesus is betrayed and evil and hatred rise against him, and he is torture, insulted and tried before being crucified between two thieves and his garments divided among the soldiers. In the midst of his pain, Jesus chose to hand over his spirit to his Father, to forgive those who killed him, to offer paradise to a thief and to pray. He refuses to die on their terms, just as he refused to live, to judge, to preach and to love on their terms. God is especially found in places of suffering, death, betrayal, injustice, mockery, loneliness and isolation.

#### **Coptic Orthodox**

Theme: The Man Born Blind

Gospel: John 9:1-41

#### *Reflection:*

This is an example of humans who were born blind spiritually unable to see the light of truth, that is Christ Himself. They need Christ's miraculous work of opening their eyes to see Him, and to know the truth.

- How did the blindness of the Man Born Blind differ from the blindness of the Pharisees?
- In what ways does this healing relate to Jesus statement about being “the light of the world”? (John 8:12, 9:5)
- Describe how your spiritual eyes have been opened during this Lenten period.



‘Jesus Healing the Blind Man’ (detail) / Public Domain

### **Reflections on the Coptic Orthodox Gospel from a Protestant perspective**

*This one thing I know, this one thing I know,  
God in great mercy pardoned me,  
Snapped sin's fetters and set me free  
Once I was blind but now I see  
This one thing I know. (Sydney Cox)*

God’s first act recorded in scripture was the creation of light – and it was good. (Genesis 1:3-4) Can you imagine being unable to see the beauty of God’s creation? Can you imagine the joy of having that ability restored in your life?

Today, restoration of physical sight is an everyday occurrence, but even so, it still brings such joy to those who have this gift of sight restored. In Jesus’ day, restoration of physical sight was a rarity, a miraculous event that was never expected, and in this narrative, an event that was just not believed.

But there is a much more significant meaning in this narrative. It is the restoration of spiritual sight to the blind. It is an illustration and reiteration of Jesus’ statement, “*I am the light of the world.*” (John 8:12, 9:5)

Not only were this man’s physical eyes restored, but so too were his spiritual eyes. In John 9:35-38 we read of a further encounter between Jesus and the man. In this encounter we see the man coming to the realisation that Jesus is the Son of Man, believing that Jesus is the Son of Man, and worshipping the Son of Man.

Pray that at this time we too may have our spiritual eyes opened to see Jesus and to know the truth.

### **3. Closing Prayer**

In silence, choose one feature from the time together and pray from it. Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something that God thinks is particularly important.

This may involve a feeling - encouraging or discouraging. It may be a word or gesture that has significance for you. Or it may be something that is emerging that seemed at the time rather insignificant. Look at it. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart - whether of intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.

Some people may choose to share a word, or an insight, or a prayer: others may prefer to remain silent.

*Together:* In all we are and in all we do, let us give glory to the Father, Son and Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen.

You may wish to offer one other a sign of peace as this time draws to a close.



Isaac Fanous / 'Crucifixion - Great and Holy Friday'

---

Enquiries and Feedback to

South Australian Council of Churches, 65 Flinders Street, Adelaide SA 5000

Ph: +618 8215 0300 | E: [sacc@picknowl.com.au](mailto:sacc@picknowl.com.au) | [www.sacc.asn.au](http://www.sacc.asn.au)

South Australian Council of Churches: nurturing and nourishing the understanding, spiritual growth and practice of ecumenism across the Churches of South Australia