

Fast, Pray, Give and Receive

LENT 2012



Spring Bulbs in England in Lent

Fast, Pray, Give and Receive

A Lenten Resource for the year 2012

prepared by

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INTRODUCTION

This resource offers suggestions for four group sessions in Lent.

Historically, Lent has been a time of preparation for the blessings of the Easter season. It is hoped that Christians from different backgrounds will be able to come together to reflect on how Lent can still be meaningful today.

The first session focuses on the concept of Lent itself. The following sessions will be devoted to three spiritual disciplines which have been traditionally associated with Lent: fasting, prayer and almsgiving. Scriptural passages, wisdom from the past, contemporary insights and questions for reflection will be offered where appropriate.

If only two group meetings in Lent are planned, the first and second sessions could be combined; similarly, the third and fourth.

Contributors

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SESSION ONE: LENT

1. Gathering

❖ Before Beginning

Take a few moments to introduce one another.

❖ Opening Prayer

It can be helpful to create a sense of sacred space by placing a bowl of water in the centre of the group. If this option is taken, each person could take it in turn to immerse their hands in the water for a few moments of silent prayer, before the next person takes their turn, each holding a small hand towel for each other.

Leader: May we accept God's invitation to let our story join with God's story and in so doing may we grow to gaze more lovingly on God, on one another and on all of creation. Amen.

2. What is Lent?

Not all churches observe Lent, and it can differ in those which do. Invite members of the group to share their experiences.

What (if anything) happens in your church in Lent today?

What are your earliest memories of Lent?

What does Lent mean for you today?

3. Lent in the Christian Tradition

The celebration of Lent began in the ancient Roman empire in the first centuries of the church. It probably evolved as part of the preparation of candidates for baptism on Easter Day. According to the account of a devout Spanish woman named Egeria, who went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the late fourth century, the time of Lent was enthusiastically embraced by other Christians in Jerusalem. There was an increase in the number of processions, church services and bible teaching. The bishop led Bible study every day:

His subject is God's law; during the forty days he goes through the whole Bible, beginning with Genesis, and first relating the literal meaning of each passage, and then interpreting its spiritual meaning. He also teaches them at this time all about the resurrection and the faith. And this is called *catechesis* . . . Thus all the people in these parts are able to follow the scriptures when they are read in church, since there has been teaching on all the Scriptures from six to nine in the morning all through Lent, three hours catechesis a day. At ordinary services when the bishop sits and preaches . . . the faithful utter exclamations, but when they come and hear him explaining the catechesis, their exclamations are far louder, God is my witness, and when it is related and interpreted like this, they ask questions on each point.

Egeria, c. 397¹

Clearly, the focus of Lent for Egeria and her fellow Christians in the fourth century was nothing less than “the whole serious and glorious matter of salvation”!²

*Why do you think Lent became such an intense time of faith education in the early church?
What does this imply about Easter?*

By the fifth century, the Lenten journey to Easter and the feast of the resurrection of Christ took Christians through the desert wilderness with Jesus, as recounted in Matthew 4:1-11. This passage, often known as the “temptation of Christ”, was read on the first Sunday in Lent, a practice which continues in many churches today.

4. God's Word

Members of the group could take turns to read a verse or two from Matthew 4:1-11.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

²He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

³The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’

⁴But he answered, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’

⁷Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; ⁹and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’

¹⁰Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” ’

¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.
Matthew 4:1-11

What leaps out at you from this passage?

What part has self-discipline played in your life, discipline freely chosen yet at some real cost?

The tempter tries to shift God from the centre of Jesus’ life. In what ways are you tempted to move away from God?

5. Self-Discipline, Spring Cleaning and “Covered Promises”

Inspired by the practice of Jesus himself in Matthew 4:1-11, and by his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:1-18), three spiritual disciplines came to be particularly associated with Lent: fasting, prayer and almsgiving. While these can be difficult and challenging, they are meant to be welcomed in a spirit of joy. Yes, we should repent of anything which keeps us from God, but this experience should be one of “joy-creating sorrow” or a “burden to be borne singing”, to quote two medieval saints.³

Can you make sense of the phrases “joy-creating sorrow” and “a burden to be borne singing”?

It is worth remembering that the English word “Lent” comes from the Anglo-Saxon term for spring, which may in turn derive from a Germanic word for long, a reference to the fact that days become longer in spring. At the spring equinox, when the hours of day and night are equal, pagan Anglo-Saxons celebrated the feast of the goddess Eastre. By the ninth century, Anglo-Saxon Christians had adopted *Easter* as the name for the Christian festival known as the *Pascha* in Latin, the commemoration of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which usually occurs near the spring equinox in the northern hemisphere.

Sometimes the link between Christian and pagan festivals is regarded in a negative light, as evidence of inappropriate syncretism. Is this how you view it, or can you see positive reasons for the Christian adaptation of some aspects of pagan culture?

In England the connection between Lent and spring is obvious. In Australia, it is quite different. As a long hot summer gives way to autumn, and the days become shorter and colder, we can easily miss the joyful resonance in the ancient Lenten practices. We need to take to heart the message of Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, even if there is no apple blossom on the trees or daffodils bursting into bloom:

It is important to remember that the word 'Lent' itself comes from the old English word for 'spring'. It's not about feeling gloomy for forty days; it's not about making yourself miserable for forty days; it's not even about giving things up for forty days. Lent is springtime. It's preparing for that great climax of springtime which is Easter – new life bursting through death. And as we prepare ourselves for Easter during these days, by prayer and by self-denial, what motivates us and what fills the horizon is not self-denial as an end in itself but trying to sweep and clean the room of our own minds and hearts so that the new life really may have room to come in and take over and transform us at Easter.⁴

Have you ever spent Lent and/or Easter in springtime?

What signs in our land or in our circle of life in Australia help us prepare for Easter – where “new life is bursting through death”?

In what ways could your mind and heart benefit from some “spring cleaning”?

It may also be helpful to bear in mind a rather odd phrase used by the great evangelist and founder of Methodism, John Wesley (1703-91). He maintained that the commands in the Sermon on the Mount are “covered promises”. By this he meant that “God hath engaged to give us whatsoever he commands . . . he will work in us this very thing”.⁵ In other words, God will not call us to anything that God will not give us the strength to undertake. So, as we explore in the next few weeks key passages in the Sermon on the Mount related to fasting, prayer and almsgiving, and the going seems rather tough, remember that the call is in response to our gracious God, and that even the hardest of commands are “covered promises”.

Do the commands in the Sermon on the Mount like “love your enemies” seem daunting to you? Can you see them as “covered promises”?

Perhaps we can take a moment to name silently anyone who is “our enemy”, any aspect of our inner being that is “our enemy”, and which regularly diminishes our capacity to act lovingly.

6. Contemporary Insights

The title for this Lenten Resource (*Fast, Pray, Give and Receive*) was inspired by Elizabeth Gilbert’s autobiographical book, *Eat, Pray, Love* (Viking, 2006). With over ten million copies in print, and a film version starring Julia Roberts released in 2010, Gilbert’s story has undoubtedly resonated with many people. On the surface, *Eat, Pray, Love* is about a middle class woman in her early thirties, a professional writer who experiences a messy divorce, a rebound fling, depression and loneliness. From there begins her search for meaning over one year in three different countries – in Italy where she learns Italian, eats a lot, rediscovers pleasure and gains over twenty pounds in weight; in India where she enters an Ashram seeking the discipline of devotion and finds it difficult to centre herself and meditate; and in Bali where she begins to find some balance and peace in her life, undertakes a global fundraising campaign to buy a house for a single mother who runs a Traditional Healing Centre, and falls in love again. Subtitled, “one woman’s search for everything”, *Eat, Pray, Love* is essentially a contemporary account of the nature of the human journey and human discipline, and the search for meaning, happiness, fulfillment and peace. While Elizabeth Gilbert tries a number of different spiritual pathways, with varying degrees of success, there is a consistent focus on what she learns about her life and her relationship with God.

Has anyone in the group read the book or seen the film, Eat, Pray, Love?

Does any part of Elizabeth Gilbert’s story strike a chord in you?

In what ways do you consider your own life a journey to closer communion with God?

7. Closing Prayer

The leader invites all to spend a few moments in silence. [Some groups may wish to take it in turn to make a sign of the cross with the water on the forehead or palms of the person alongside, offering a silent prayer for that person.]

Together: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever. Amen.

Let us offer each other a sign of peace.

SESSION TWO: FAST

1. Gathering

❖ Before Beginning

Take a few moments to recall the previous session. What particularly stayed in your mind?

❖ Opening Prayer

The leader could place a bowl with water, surrounded by a few small stones or pebbles, in the sacred space at the centre of the group.

Leader: Let us place ourselves gently before our loving and eternal God. May we be attentive to the feelings that surface as we turn our thoughts to our time together. Do we feel doubtful? Cheerful? Apprehensive? Full of delighted anticipation? Let these feelings turn into prayer. Seek God's guidance. Ask God for help and understanding. Pray for hope.

If there is a bowl of water, each person could take it in turn to lift a pebble, feel its shape in their hand, and place it gently in the water.

Leader: Loving and eternal God, you know how hard it can be for the human heart to change. May we, through a letting go of self, come to know the Father, Son and Spirit in the ordinary everyday events and encounters of life. Amen.

2. God's Word

Have someone from the group slowly read the following passage aloud and then have someone else read it second time.

**And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites,
for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting.**

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,

**¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father
who is in secret;**

and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Matthew 6:16-18

Spend a few minutes in silence quietly reflecting on this passage.

Group members might then like to share with one another some thoughts or feelings which arose during this time.

3. Fasting in the Christian Tradition

Fasting was a common practice in ancient Judaism where it was associated with repentance and prayer (examples of this can be found in Leviticus 23:32, Judges 20:26, and Nehemiah 9:1). In the New Testament, Jesus himself fasted for forty days and nights after his baptism (Matthew 4:2). From the phrase *whenever you fast* in Matthew 6:16, it is clear that Jesus assumed that his followers would also fast from food as part of their spiritual practices.

The discipline of fasting became associated with Lent very early in the history of the church. In fact, the original Latin term for what we know as Lent is *Jejunium*, the Fast. It is still known as the “Great Fast” in the Orthodox tradition.

Egeria, the early Christian pilgrim mentioned in the previous session, described the practices that she witnessed in Jerusalem in the fourth century:

These are their customs of fasting in Lent. There are some who eat nothing during the whole week between their meal after the Sunday service, and the one they have after the service on Saturday . . . Those who in Lent cannot manage this eat on two days of the week, and those who cannot manage this have a meal every evening. No one lays down how much is to be done, but each person does what he can; those who keep the full rule are not praised, and those who do less are not criticised.⁶

Have you ever tried to fast for a certain amount of time? How did it go?

It was recognised very early on that more was involved in fasting than abstinence from food. St John Chrysostom (347-407) described fasting as a “medicine” and warned that, like other medications, it had to be employed skilfully. It was of no use refraining from food if one did not also refrain from sinful practices!⁷

The “Desert Fathers” and “Desert Mothers” of the early church were experienced ascetics. The Greek word *askesis*, from which asceticism is derived, really means “training”, as in training for an athletic contest. For the Desert Fathers and Mothers, it implied training for an encounter with God. Amma (Mother) Syncletica warned against extreme measures: “Do not fast for four or five days and break it the following day with any amount of food. In truth, lack of proportion always corrupts.”⁸ Abba (Father) Hyperichius stressed the importance of good behaviour in other areas: “It is better to eat meat and drink wine than to eat the flesh of the brothers by

disparaging them.” Others spoke of the dangers of pride and self-righteousness. It was not the ability to go without food which mattered most but detachment from anything which would distract from God.⁹

In the Middle Ages it was the custom for Christians in both the Eastern and Western churches to abstain from flesh meat on all Fridays throughout the year and during Lent, in commemoration of the Passion of Christ. Fasting regulations were abandoned by some Protestant churches during the sixteenth-century Reformation, but continued in England. The seventeenth-century Anglican poet Robert Herrick (1591-1674) was aware that the directives on fasting in the Book of Common Prayer could be observed in a token manner far removed from their spirit:

To Keep a True Lent

Is this a Fast, to keep
 The Larder leane?
 And cleane
 From fat of Veales and Sheep?

Is it to quit the dish
 Of Flesh, yet still
 To fill
 The platter high with Fish?

Is it to faste an houre
 Or rag'd to go,
 Or show
 A downcast look, and sour?

No; 'tis a Fast, to dole
 Thy sheaf of wheat
 And meat
 Unto the hungry soule.

It is to fast from strife,
 From old debate
 And hate;
 To circumsise thy life.

To shew a heart grief-rent;
 To starve thy sin,
 Not Bin;
 and that's to keep thy Lent.¹⁰

From observing only a token fast, it was a small step to abandoning fasting altogether. John Wesley disapproved of this in the eighteenth century, writing in his diary in 1763:

Is not the neglect of this plain duty (I mean fasting, ranked by our Lord with almsgiving and prayer) one general occasion of deadness among Christians? Can anyone willingly neglect it and be guiltless?

What benefits can you see associated with fasting?

Does it have any deeper meaning for you?

What challenges arise?

4. Fasting Today

❖ Abstinence from Food

The practice of abstinence from not only meat but also fish, eggs, milk, cheese, oil and wine is still common in Eastern churches, but is no longer widely observed in Roman Catholicism. Only two obligatory fast days remain: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Within your Christian tradition, is there or has there been an expectation of fasting during Lent or at any other time? How is/was this practiced?

It is somewhat ironic, as Pope Benedict XVI observed in his 2009 Message for Lent, that “while fasting seems to have lost something of its spiritual meaning . . . [it] has taken on, in a culture characterised by the search for material wellbeing, a therapeutic value for the care of one’s body.”¹¹ Many people today fast to lose weight or to “detox”.

Have you ever fasted for health reasons? Was it beneficial?

In the Christian tradition, fasting is more than just an aid to physical well-being. Bishop Kallistos Ware of the Eastern Orthodox Church insists:

The primary aim of fasting is to make us *conscious of our dependence upon God*. If practiced seriously, the Lenten abstinence from food - particularly in the opening days - involves a considerable measure of real hunger, and also a feeling of tiredness and physical exhaustion. The purpose of this is to lead us in turn to a sense of inward brokenness and contrition; to bring us, that is, to the point where we appreciate the full force of Christ's statement, 'Without Me you can do

nothing' (John 15: 5). If we always take our fill of food and drink, we easily grow over-confident in our own abilities, acquiring a false sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency. The observance of a physical fast undermines this sinful complacency. Stripping from us the specious assurance of the Pharisee - who fasted, it is true, but not in the right spirit - Lenten abstinence gives us the saving self-dissatisfaction of the Publican (Luke I 8: 10-13). Such is the function of the hunger and the tiredness: to make us 'poor in spirit', aware of our helplessness and of our dependence on God's aid.

Yet it would be misleading to speak only of this element of weariness and hunger. Abstinence leads, not merely to this, but also to a sense of lightness, wakefulness, freedom and joy. Even if the fast proves debilitating at first, afterwards we find that it enables us to sleep less, to think more clearly, and to work more decisively. As many doctors acknowledge, periodical fasts contribute to bodily hygiene. While involving genuine self-denial, fasting does not seek to do violence to our body but rather to restore it to health and equilibrium. Most of us in the Western world habitually eat more than we need. Fasting liberates our body from the burden of excessive weight and makes it a willing partner in the task of prayer, alert and responsive to the voice of the Spirit.¹²

*Have you ever fasted for any of the reasons which Bishop Ware gives?
Was it a helpful experience?*

In the book and the film, *Eat, Pray, Love*, it was not fasting but the joy of eating well that was a life-giving discovery for the author. Fasting and an appreciation of good food are not, however, incompatible. Mystic and writer Monica Furlong (1930-2003) made the surprising comment:

The most searching and profound prayer any of us can make is to eat our dinner. To eat at all is to recognize—if we are humble enough to admit it—our total dependence.¹³

Furlong confessed that:

Over the years I have developed the dangerous trick of using food to achieve other ends apart from fulfilling simple physical needs—to tranquilize me when I am anxious, to cheer me when I am sad, to pep me still further when am I jolly. In the end it is hard to know any longer whether I am hungry or not, hard too to break out of the “automatic” eating at regular times.

In what ways do you use food?

There is also the issue of how we obtain our food; how it is prepared, transported and marketed. In the West today, we can go into supermarkets and see before us a feast of food beyond the wildest imagination of even our fairly recent ancestors. Strawberries and cherries are no longer summer-time treats, they can be enjoyed in the middle of winter too—if you can afford to pay for them! Sadly, there are still millions living in the world today who lack the resources to produce or buy adequate food. Monica Furlong concluded: “To fast is to learn to love and appreciate food, and one’s own good fortune in having it.”

❖ Other Forms of Abstinence

A helpful discipline prior to Lent might be to discern where we need to fast. It might not necessarily be from food. If we are driven to answer our emails, messages and mobile phones, perhaps restricting our use during Lent might be a gift to us. If we find that we watch too much television or spend too much time surfing the Net, perhaps restricting our use during Lent would be helpful. If we find ourselves complaining too much, getting impatient when we have to queue, or getting irritable in traffic, we might consider what a fast would look like to help us deal with these problems.

Take time to reflect on the last week. What areas of your life might be helped by a fast? Where do you need to create space? Are there character traits or behaviours that need to be “starved”?

❖ Developing Alternative Practices

It can be helpful and important to put a positive practice in place alongside the fast. For example, the time usually spent preparing and consuming food could be given instead to prayer and reflective reading of Scripture. If you fast from complaining about other people, you might also seek to speak well of them and honour them in some way.

What positive behaviours might you put in place of the habits you intend to “fast” from?

5. 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 - positive or negative. It may be something that another said that had significance for you or a fleeting moment of peace. Or it may be something that seems rather insignificant. Look at it. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart - whether of intercession, praise, repentance or gratitude.

Together: Let us give glory to the Father, Son and Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen.

Let us offer each other a sign of peace.

SESSION THREE: PRAY

1. Gathering

❖ Before Beginning

Take a moment to recall the previous session. What new insights into fasting did you gain? Have you decided to practice a form of fasting? If so, how are you going?

❖ Opening Prayer

The leader could place a bowl of water with the stones or pebbles from last week in the sacred space at the centre of the group.

This week, the leader could also light a candle.

Leader: Loving and eternal God, enlighten our time together with your presence. Enable us to pray by being still in your presence, by giving thanks for life's blessings, and by laying before you what is on our hearts at this time. Help us in our praying in silence and words, in pauses and actions, to find your light for the time ahead.

[Some groups may wish to take it in turn to hold the candle for a few moments of silent prayer, of listening to God, before handing it on to the next person. The last person places it alongside the water and stones.]

Leader: Loving and eternal God, your light is with us always. May we, through a letting go of self, come to know more deeply the illumination that the Father, Son and Spirit offer to the ordinary everyday events and encounters of life. Amen.

2. Pray in the Christian Tradition

Prayer is fundamental to Christian life. Prayer may take place in private (Matthew 6:6) or in public worship (Acts 3:1). What is the essence of prayer? Here are three famous definitions from the Orthodox, Lutheran and Catholic traditions:

Prayer is an uprising of the mind to God or a petitioning of God for what is fitting.
St John of Damascus (c.657-c.749)¹⁴

[Prayer is] a climbing up of the heart unto God.
Martin Luther (1483-1546)¹⁵

For me, prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy; finally it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus.

St Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-97)¹⁶

Do these definitions resonate with your experience of prayer?

What is the difference between praying "in secret" and praying publicly in an act of corporate worship?

Do you have a preferred way of praying?

The Desert Mothers and Fathers of the early church devoted their lives to prayer. Ideally, they sought remote areas where they could pray in peace and quiet. Yet Amma Syncletica cautioned: "There are many who live in the mountains and behave as if they were in the town, and they are wasting their time. It is possible to be a solitary in one's mind while living in a crowd, and it is possible for one who is a solitary to live in the crowd of personal thoughts."¹⁷ Abba Macarius was asked, "How should we pray?" He replied, "There is no need to talk much in prayer. Reach out your hands often, and say, 'Lord, have mercy on me, as you will and as you know.' But if the conflict troubles you, say, 'Lord, help me.' He knows what is best for us and has mercy."¹⁸

Where is the best place for prayer for you?

How comfortable are you with silence?

How do you handle distracting thoughts?

Early Christian ascetics found that they could calm a restless mind by memorizing and repeating words or verses from Scripture. Some people just say the name *Jesus* over and over again. Another common mantra is *Maranatha*, the Aramaic word used in 1 Corinthians 16: "O Lord, Come". It can be slowly repeated in syllables of equal length: MA-RA-NA-THA. This ancient practice is encouraged by the World Community for Christian Meditation, founded in 1991 by Laurence Freeman and inspired by the work of his fellow Benedictine monk John Main (1926-1982). For further information, see the World Community's website: <http://www.wccm.org>. There is also an Australian website: <http://www.christianmeditationaustralia.org>.

Has anyone in the group tried this form of meditation? Was it helpful?

There are many different ways in which we can pray. St Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) encouraged imaginatively entering into a scripture story and noticing the feelings or reactions that arise within you as you observe or participate in some way in the scene. St Benedict (c.480-c.550) particularly valued *lectio divina* or sacred reading. This involves slowly, reverently reading passages from the Bible. The aim is not to analyze the meaning of the words, but to gently mull over and savour them, pausing to let them sink deep within you and to make space

for God to speak to you. Both these methods can be tried when we are on our own or when we are in groups. Your group might like to try one or the other.

3. Praying with Scripture

❖ Alternative A: Imaginative Meditation on God's Word

To pray the Scriptures in this way, it is important to be familiar with a scriptural text.

Have someone from the group slowly read the following passage aloud.

**5 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites;
for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners,
so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you,
they have received their reward.**

**6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door
and pray to your Father who is in secret;
and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.**

**7 'When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do;
for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.**

**8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask
him.**

9 'Pray then in this way:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.**

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

**Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

**¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.**

**¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.**

**¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father
will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others,**

**neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.
Matthew 6:5-15**

Another person in the group could slowly read aloud the following suggestions to assist private meditation.

Relax, perhaps even close your eyes.

Visualize the scene: Jesus is preaching the Sermon on the Mount.

What does “the mount” look like? Don’t worry if your imaginary hill or mountain bears no resemblance to the geography of the Middle East.

What is the weather like?

How large is the crowd?

Imagine that you are present. Can you feel the sun or the wind on your face?

Are you at the front of the crowd or at the back?

How do you feel when you hear Jesus’s words?

Does a particular word or phrase really stand out for you?

Just notice your reactions.

Perhaps you get the opportunity to speak to Jesus after he has finished talking. Do you approach him confidently, or hang back and wait for him to notice you?

What do you want to say to Jesus? How does he respond?

Don’t try to “stage manage” the scene. Let your thoughts flow naturally.

Notice any connections between the scene you are visualizing and your own life situation, any strong reactions which might relate to your personal situation.

Talk to Jesus about these connections.

After about fifteen minutes of private meditation, group members might like to share how they found this form of prayer.

❖ **Alternative B: *Lectio Divina***

One person from the group could slowly read the passage from Matthew’s 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.

4. The Results of Prayer

We are told to pray for our needs and those of others (see for example Philippians 4:6) and yet we have all no doubt experienced times when God does not seem to answer our prayers. Elizabeth Gilbert pondered this mystery in her book *Eat, Pray, Love*:

There's a wonderful old Italian joke about a poor man who goes to church every day and prays before the statue of a great saint, begging, "Dear Saint – please, please, please...give me the grace to win the lottery." This lament goes on for months. Finally the exasperated statue comes to life, looks down at the begging man and says in weary disgust, "My son – please, please, please...*buy a ticket.*" Prayer is a relationship; half the job is mine. If I want transformation, but can't be bothered to articulate what, exactly, I'm aiming for, how will it ever occur? Half the benefit of prayer is in the asking itself, in the offering of a clearly posed and well-considered intention.¹⁹

Margaret Silf suggests that it is a mistake to think of prayer as "some kind of machine, or solution to fix a problem". Members of the group could take it in turns to read a paragraph from her book *On Prayer*:

Anyone who has ever prayed
for a particular outcome
will know how it feels when God doesn't seem to "answer" the prayer.

When this happens,
we may need to ask ourselves, again,
who God is for us.

If our dominant (though unconscious) image of God
is a kind of Santa Claus,
we may well be disappointed if God doesn't give us
what we ask for.

If God is a “parent”, there to tell us what to do,
 or to provide us with absolute security,
 we may feel bewildered when no obvious guidance
 is forthcoming,
 or when we feel very insecure and vulnerable.

But if, in prayer, we are truly seeking relationship
 with the God who is Mystery,
 yet dwells in our own hearts,
 and moves and acts in everything we do and are,
 then prayer will always deepen that relationship.

We may not see or feel any immediate change,
 but authentic prayer always makes a difference.
 It changes our attitudes,
 and transforms our vision, of ourselves,
 our relationships and our world.

Others may sense the change in us,
 even when we cannot see it in ourselves.
 We will know the power of prayer by its fruits,
 though those fruits may be a long time in ripening.
 Hard hearts may soften,
 old resentments yield to new compassion,
 breakdown lead to breakthrough.

Prayer that works is prayer that makes a difference,
 contemplation that turns into action,
 on behalf of peace and justice
 in a troubled and unjust world system.

Prayer is energy,
 the energy of love and transforming power.

It is given to us for the good of all creation.
 In prayer God gives us the fuel of life,
 and asks us to live it.²⁰

Have you been blessed with answers to prayer that seemed miraculous?

Have there been times when prayer did not seem to be answered, but gradually you became aware that you were changing, even if the situation for which you prayed did not?

Do you agree with Elizabeth Gilbert that “half the benefit of prayer is in the asking itself”?

5. 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.

Together: Let us give glory to the Father, Son and Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen.

Let us offer each other a sign of peace.

Note: next week, each person is invited to bring along a small symbol of new life.

SESSION FOUR: GIVE AND RECEIVE

1. Gathering

❖ Before Beginning

Take a moment to recall the previous session and share any insights you might have gained about prayer during the week.

❖ Opening Prayer

[The week before, each person is invited to bring along a small symbol of new life.]

The leader could place a bowl of water together with the stones or pebbles and a lit candle in the sacred space at the centre of the group.

Each person could take it in turn, in silence, to place their symbol around the bowl, keeping an awareness of the sense of touch and the feeling of letting go.

Leader: Jesus is our brother – our friend. Let us spend a moment in conversation with Jesus. Ask forgiveness for when we failed. Ask for his protection and help. Ask for his wisdom about the questions we have and the problems we face. Let us do all this in the spirit of gratitude. The lives of each one of us is a gift, and it is adorned with gifts from God. Amen.

2. God's Word

Have someone in the group slowly read this passage from Matthew's Gospel.

**² So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you,
as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets,
so that they may be praised by others.**

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

**³But when you give alms,
do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,
⁴so that your alms may be done in secret;
and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.**

Matthew 6:2-4

3. Almsgiving in the Christian Tradition

Along with fasting and prayer, “almsgiving” is a practice associated with Lent in the Christian tradition. The term comes from the Greek word *eleemosyne*. In his study on the use of money in the early church, Justo Gonzalez points out that *eleemosyne* originally meant “a merciful action or a gift born of kindness, and it was often used this way in classical antiquity, in the New Testament, and in early Christian writings. Only later did it come to mean small change handed to a beggar.”²¹

Early Christian fathers thundered against those who ignored the needs of the poor. Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389) was a theologian and bishop in the eastern church:

Human beings have accumulated in their coffers gold and silver, clothes more sumptuous than useful, diamonds and other such objects that are evidence of war and tyranny; then a foolish arrogance hardens their hearts; for their brothers in distress, no pity. What utter blindness! They do not realise that poverty and riches, social contrasts and other such distinctions were late arrivals among human beings. They spread like epidemics . . . Hold fast to that primitive equality, forget subsequent divisions. Attend not to the law of the strong but to the law of the Creator. Help nature to the best of your ability, honor the freedom of creation, protect your species from dishonor, come to its aid in sickness, rescue it from poverty . . . Seek to distinguish yourself from others only by your generosity. Be like gods for the poor, imitating God's mercy. Humanity has nothing so much in common with God as the ability to do good . . . ²²

“Humanity has nothing so much in common with God as the ability to do good.”

How do you react to that powerful statement?

John Chrysostom (347-407) also maintained that “nothing can make a man an imitator of Christ as caring for his neighbours. Indeed, even though you fast, or sleep on hard ground, or even suffer unto death, but should you take no thought for your neighbour, you have done nothing great.”²³ John had no sympathy for those who doubted that beggars were genuinely in need:

“But he fakes all that weakness and trembling,” you tell me. And, saying so, you do not fear that a bolt of lightning will strike you from heaven? Forgive me, but such words make me burst with wrath. You who fatten yourselves and enjoy your ease, you who drink well into the night, and then cover yourselves with soft blankets . . . you dare demand a strict account from the needy who is little more than a corpse, and you fear not the account you will have to render before the court of Christ, terrible and frightful? If the poor fake, it is out of need that they

fake, for it is your merciless inhumanity and your cruelty that forces them to do so.

In response to those who claimed that they were poor as well, and therefore could not help others, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-c. 395) declared:

Granted; suppose you are. Nevertheless, give what you can; God asks for nothing above your powers. You can give a loaf yourself, another will give a cup of wine, another clothing; thus one man's hardship will be relieved by your combined aid. It was not from one benefactor but from the whole people that Moses took what was needed to build the tabernacle; one who was rich in gold bought that, another silver; a poor man brought skins, and one still poorer the hair of goats. Consider too how the widow's mite was more than the offerings of the rich . . . ²⁴

What excuses do we make today to avoid almsgiving?

Are John Chrysostom's and Gregory of Nyssa's arguments still valid?

4. Generosity

Matthew 6:2-4 not only talks about giving but about generosity and hiddenness as well.

Generosity is seen as an attribute of God in the Bible.

**I am the Lord your God,
who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.
Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.**

**I would feed you with the finest of wheat,
and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.**

Psalm 85: 10, 16

**For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ,
that though he was rich,
yet for your sakes he became poor,
so that by his poverty you might become rich.**

2 Corinthians 8:9

Joan Chittister and Rowan Williams continue the call of the early Christian Fathers in the twenty-first century:

Clearly, the purpose of wealth is not security. The purpose of wealth is reckless generosity, the kind that sings of the lavish love of God, the kind that rekindles hope on dark days, the kind that reminds us that God is with us always. It creates in the holy heart a freedom of spirit that takes a person light footed through the world, scattering possibility as it goes.²⁵

Growth as a disciple of Jesus will include growth in generosity.

What are the barriers to generosity in people's lives?

How do we overcome them?

What would "reckless generosity" look like?

Jesus also emphasises that our giving should be in secret.

In what ways is that different from our society's values?

What is the value of secret generosity?

In his book, *Money, Sex and Power*, Richard Foster suggests one of the ways that Christians should give is by seeking out those causes that lack celebrity status: "We are to seek out and generously support the disenfranchised and disinherited".²⁶

How is this different from the values of our culture?

How might we develop this practice in our lives?

In the last session we reflected on prayer and the different ways in which prayer can be answered. When you pray for another person, have you ever realised that you yourself could be part of the answer to your prayer? Elizabeth Gilbert writes in *Eat, Pray, Love* of a time when she was stuck by this truth:

A family in my sister's neighborhood was recently stricken with a double tragedy, when both the young mother and her three year old son were diagnosed with cancer. When Catherine told me about this, I could only say, shocked, "Dear God, that family needs grace." She replied firmly, "That family needs

casseroles” and then proceeded to organize the entire neighborhood into bringing that family dinner, in shifts, every single night, for an entire year. I do not know if my sister fully recognizes that this *is* grace.²⁷

While the young mother and her family were clearly helped by the gift of cooked meals, consider the impact on those who provided the food. It would not be surprising if they too benefited from the experience of living in such a close-knit, supportive neighbourhood.

Can you think of occasions when you have been either the giver or the recipient of practical help of this nature? What did it mean for you?

5. Receiving

Pope Benedict XVI highlighted some of the benefits of giving in his Lenten Message in 2008:

In inviting us to consider almsgiving with a more profound gaze that transcends the purely material dimension, Scripture teaches us that there is more joy in giving than in receiving (cf. Acts 20,35). When we do things out of love, we express the truth of our being; indeed, that we have been created not for ourselves but for God and our brothers and sisters (cf. 2 Cor 5,15). Every time when, for the love of God, we share our goods with our neighbour in need, we discover that the fullness of life comes from love and all is returned to us a blessing in the form of peace, inner satisfaction and joy By drawing close to others through almsgiving, we draw close to God; it can become an instrument for authentic conversion and reconciliation with Him and our brothers and sisters.

Nevertheless, it is not always easy to receive help from others.

Recall Peter’s reluctance to let Jesus wash his feet.

Jesus came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”

John 13:6-9

Peter's initial refusal to have Jesus wash his feet reminds us that some of us resist receiving God's gifts to us.

Why does Peter refuse to let Jesus wash his feet?

Why might we refuse to receive gifts from others?

Why does Jesus insist on Peter having his feet washed?

Why might the gracious receiving of gifts from others be part of a healthy spirituality?

What are some the practices that help us receive God's gifts to us?

How we can increase our connectedness, our openness, our receptivity ... to Christ in our world, to Christ in one another?

What difference will it make and what will it look like at the various layers of society, of church?

As this time of preparation for the blessings of the Easter season draws to a close, you are invited to consider what you have learned, or received, with integrity and love, from others in the group.

What gift from another have you received that has illuminated an aspect of your faith that may have been hidden or obscured until now?

What have you received which has nurtured a deepened communion in Christ and the Spirit?

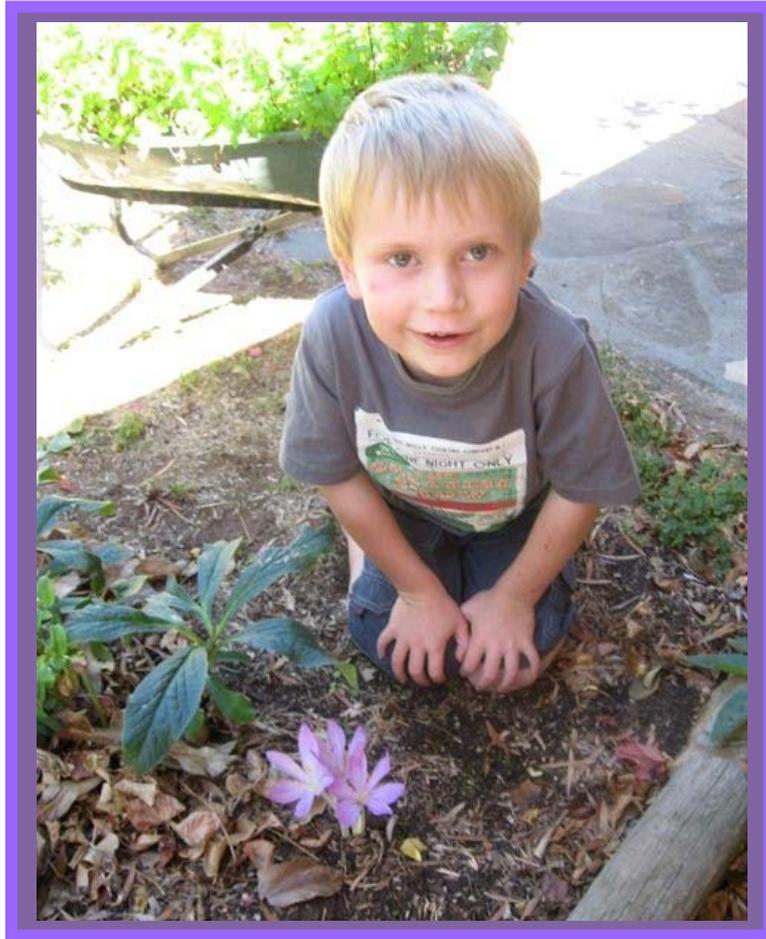
6. Closing Prayer

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—positive or negative. It may be a significant encounter with another person or a vivid moment of pleasure or peace. Or it may be something that seems rather insignificant. Look at it. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart - whether of intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.

Together: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever. Amen.

Let us offer each other a sign of peace.



Ben discovers an autumn crocus in Adelaide just before Easter.

End Notes

¹ John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (London: SPCK, 1971), pp. 144-5.

² Benedicta Ward, *In Company with Christ Through Lent, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost* (London: SPCK, 2005), pp. 10-11.

³ St John Climacus (died 649) spoke of "joy-creating sorrow". See Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom* (New York: St Vladimir's Press, 2001). St Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) used the phrase *pondus cantabile*, "a burden to be borne singing". See Ward, *In Company with Christ*, p. 11.

⁴ Archbishop of Canterbury's Easter Message, 2009, <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2213>.

⁵ John Wesley, "Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount", Discourse 5. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-25-upon-our-lords-sermon-on-the-mount-discourse-five/>

⁶ Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, pp. 130-1.

⁷ John Chrysostom, Homily III Concerning the Statues, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol 9.

⁸ Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), p. 55.

⁹ Benedicta Ward, ed., *Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 28.

¹⁰ George Every, Richard Harries and Kallistos Ware, eds. *Seasons of the Spirit: Readings Through the Christian Year* (London: SPCK, 1984), p. 119.

¹¹ Message of his Holiness Benedict XVI for Lent 2009, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/lent/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20081211_lent-2009_en.html

¹² Kallistos Ware, "The Meaning of the Great Fast" in *The Lenten Triodion: Translated from the Original Greek by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p. 16.

¹³ Every et al., *Seasons of the Spirit*, p. 118.

¹⁴ John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book III, chapter 24, in Philip Schaff, ed, *Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 9 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989).

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Table Talk*; <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/luther/tabletalk.v.xii.html>

¹⁶ *Journey of a Soul: The Autobiography of St Therese of Liseux*, 3rd edition, trans. John Clarke (Washington: ICS Publications, 1996), p. 242.

¹⁷ Swan, *Forgotten Desert Mothers*, p. 58.

¹⁸ Ward, *Desert Fathers*, p. 132.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, p. 185-6.

²⁰ Margaret Silf, *On Prayer* (Oxford: Lion, 2004), pp. 94-6.

²¹ Justo Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance and Use of Money* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 126.

²² Gregory of Nazianzus, *On the Love for the Poor*, cited in Oliver Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (London: New City, 1995), p. 295.

²³ John Chrysostom, from a homily quoted in Peter Phan, *Social Thought*. Messages of the Fathers of the Church 20 (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1984), p. 153.

²⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Love of the Poor*, in Phan, *Social Thought* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1984), p. 131.

²⁵ Joan Chittister & Rowan Williams, *Uncommon Gratitude*, Collegeville, Minnesota: Order of St Benedict, 2010.

²⁶ Richard Foster, *Money, Sex and Power*, San Francisco: Harper and Row; 1985, p. 77.

²⁷ Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, p. 95.