



LENTEN
PROGRAM
2018

LISTENING TO THE
WISDOM OF THE
DESERT

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GUIDELINES FOR GROUPS

☼ Consider electing a facilitator to direct group discussion. That person may wish to ask various group members to read passages and readings from this booklet.

☼ Be respectful. Make sure when discussing a topic that people speak one at a time and that no one monopolises the group.

☼ Listen attentively to each person's view, even if different from your own. Pope Francis emphasises the importance of dialogue and diversity in society. This particularly applies in small groups, which are a microcosm of the wider world.

☼ Be an example to each other and see what you can learn from each other in these sessions.

Reminder: As you embark on your own desert journey with Jesus this Lent, reflect on Jesus' ministry and where he might be leading you. Please take what you need from these weekly readings and exercises and leave out what you find less useful, depending on time constraints. In your own time, or with your Lenten group, practise prayer and meditation, or prayer practices such as lectio divina (see explanation at the end of this chapter) with the scripture readings. Take note of what speaks to you personally from the gospel and the readings – maybe single words, or phrases, or ideas – since different things speak to different people spiritually. Take those ideas into your daily life and ask yourself where God is sending you.

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Here we experience greater insight and ability to listen to God.

WEEK 3 **14** **Deeper in the desert – the decision to let go of what disturbs us**

Here we develop a deeper insight into what we might need to let go of in our lives.

WEEK 4 **18** **Being re-created in the desert**

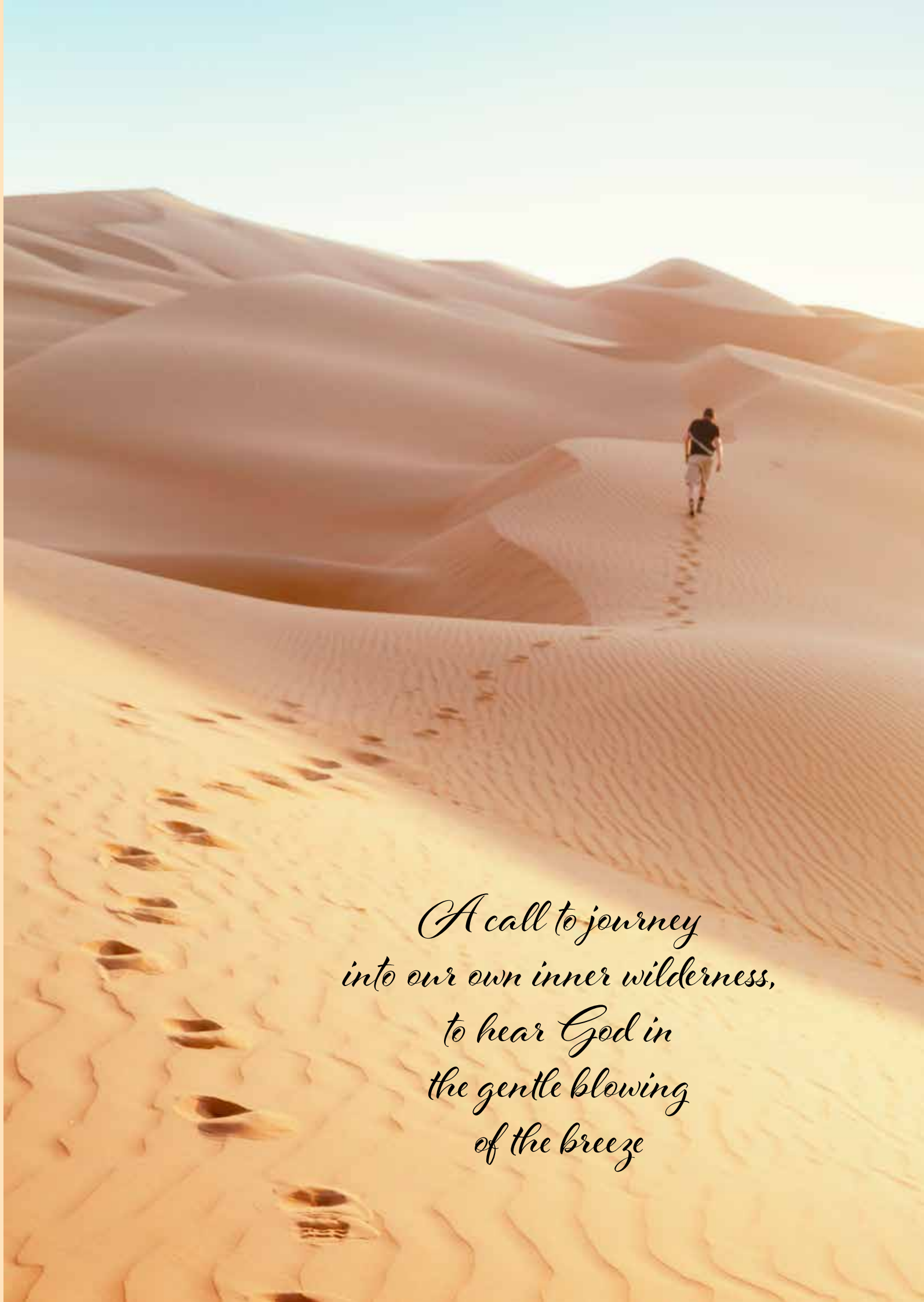
Here we open up to being renewed in a way that we might not have planned.

WEEK 5 **22** **Continuing to live in the mystery that the desert has revealed**

Here we commit to be open to the call of the Spirit in our lives, wherever it may lead us.

WEEK 6 **26** **PALM SUNDAY**

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*A call to journey
into our own inner wilderness,
to hear God in
the gentle blowing
of the breeze*



A call to journey with Jesus into the unknown

The theme for this Lenten booklet is 'Listening to the wisdom of the desert'. It was chosen because in most cultures and religions the desert is a powerful symbol of a place to find God, to find ourselves, and to make discoveries in our inner life.

During his forty days in the desert, Jesus gained clarity about the direction his life was to take. I hope that during this time of reflection you can hear what your own desert experiences are saying to you, and how your own spiritual experiences speak to you in unexpected ways throughout your journey. Each theme and gospel for these six weeks of Lent offer a step along the way in experiencing the wisdom of the desert.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DESERT

Throughout the history of the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) the desert was like a character in itself: a place full of unpredictability and wild animals, a place for those seeking monastic solidarity, or for those who, for whatever

reason, were hiding.

In the Christian tradition, and in particular for the desert fathers and mothers of the first few centuries of Christianity, the desert was seen as a place of transformation, or 'metanoia'; it was a place of contemplation where they went to seek wisdom and to experience God more acutely.

May the Holy Spirit lead us on a true journey of conversion, so that we can rediscover the gift of God's word ...

Pope Francis' Lenten message for 2017

The father of western monasticism was St Benedict of Nursia, who lived during the fifth and sixth centuries. He talks about the pilgrimage and movement that is a continual turning towards God: Contemplation – Conversion – Metanoia. A pilgrimage of sorts, the desert experience often involved movement from one state to another, literally and figuratively.

Lent has also been seen as a time of being called to conversion: to be open to 'metanoia', to change – a call to turn to God and renew our spiritual commitment. The readings for the beginning of Lent this year are not only about Christ's call to ministry, but also about creation and the covenant God has made with us: our individual call to be part of God's plan.

Christ's journey into the wilderness, his call to ministry and how he died to lead us to God give us cause to reflect. Christ's own desert experience leads us to make a commitment to shed what no longer matters or serves us in our lives, so that we can live the life we are meant to live to our fullest capacity.

Lent can be a time that reflects our own journey into the desert with Jesus, a journey into the unknown. Just as it probably was for Jesus, our desert may be a place where we feel overwhelmed or challenged. The complexities and unpredictability of life seem somehow more vivid in Lent; they present themselves with more urgency.

ELIJAH HEARS GOD

There is a lovely scriptural passage which talks about the prophet Elijah hearing God in the gentle blowing of the breeze. (1 Kgs 19:11-12). If we pay attention to the subtle movements of the Spirit during Lent, we too, may hear God speaking to us.

Is the desert calling you to find more quiet time to be with God, to be less rushed? Or is it calling you to discern a new direction in life?

Jesus no doubt experienced the physical hardships of the desert, but we can assume that when he went into his own internal desert, experiencing doubts, fears, anxieties, and temptations, he eventually discerned his mission. This was because of his irrevocable bond with God.

LETTING GO

Often we choose to mark the Lenten period by giving up something like chocolates. Yet often the hardest thing to do

is to give up distraction in the world, and instead focus on prayer and meditation. But the reward is great: we enter into the story of Jesus' passion and the common journey we all share to the place of the heart in our world.

We also look at the story of our own lives and see where God is leading us. As Lent begins, the early stage of the year is frantic: the holidays are over for most of us, as everyone is back to the merry-go-round of work and life. The constant stream of disturbing news and polarised opinion from the wider world reminds us starkly that peace is not all around.

The messiness and suffering that surround us in the world and trouble our inner life are part of the fabric of life and part of the Lenten experience. As we head towards Easter, we long for a rebirth and rejoicing of some kind.

Through Jesus' journey, through Lenten observance and letting go of attachments, we can acknowledge, as

the Buddhists do, that impermanence is part of life. The desert lets us know that we are part of a much bigger picture in our lives. We are being transformed by God in this wilderness of the unknown.

This is exemplified in Graham's desert story and in the gospel reading for this first week of Lent: Jesus is in the desert, in isolation – then he moves on to his ministry. What this demonstrates is that despite the fear and anxiety that invariably goes on around us, Lent is a desert experience that calls us to get closer to God.

Karl Rahner, the Jesuit theologian, wrote that 'the Christian of the future will be a mystic or nothing at all'. Lent urges us to go deeper into our own hearts despite the distractions of the world around us. Lent calls us to go beyond all the religious differences, worries and pettiness to seek that covenant, that bond with God.

WEEK 1

Here we seek to confront the things we struggle with; a place where we are called to reflect on the direction of our lives.

OPENING PRAYER

Read by all

Open my heart Lord,
to see the path where
you are calling me
Let me be present
to the wisdom of the
desert
Let me listen with
the ear of my heart.
Let me know what
your will is for me
And help me to
carry that out.
Let my gifts be
useful to others.
Help me to
let go of fear
And be open to love.
AMEN.

Jesus is driven into the desert for 40 days

READINGS

First Reading: Genesis 9:8-15

Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:18-22

GOSPEL

Mk 1:12-15

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness and he remained there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan. He was with the wild beasts, and the angels looked after him.

After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. 'The time has come' he said 'and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News.'

COMMENTARY

In the first reading from Genesis, the message from God is clearly one of blessing and peace. In this wonderful creative act of God, we are hearing the clear affirmation of God's covenant – an eternal relationship with us that cannot be broken.

Throughout our journey, even though we may sometimes feel distant or alienated from God, we can trust that when we are in the desert, this irrevocable bond sustains us when we undergo doubt, fear or pain.

This gospel reading expands the ideas in the previous readings: Jesus' true identity is revealed as part of the fulfilment of God's plan. Through Jesus' testing in the desert, he then knows his calling, and is able to proclaim the gospel – the revelation of the kingdom of God.

Jesus goes through his testing in the wilderness before he embarks on his ministry. God calls Jesus to take himself away and withdraw into himself, into prayer, into discerning his mission, in the desert. In responding to the calling, Jesus finds his destiny.

This is where the transformation takes place. There are no distractions from other people or material comforts in the desert. This is a clear direction that God has given Jesus; it is only after this that he goes into Galilee and proclaims the gospel – the good news.

My desert journey GRAHAM'S STORY

My wife and I had been married for about 5 years when we started trying, in a focused way, to fall pregnant. We had not anticipated any difficulties in this process. We were naïve.

After about a year or so, it became apparent that it was not going to simply happen. We began seeking help and advice from health and medical professionals.

My wife had some investigative medical procedures; I was given a sperm count. The medical opinion was that there was nothing obvious standing in the way of us falling pregnant.

We kept trying.

We heard about a very successful Chinese herbalist who had helped a number of people we had met. We spent the next few years (or so) boiling up foul-smelling and bitter-tasting brews on our kitchen stove and consuming these in hope. Nothing.

We heard of another clinic that had reported high success rates. We went through another barrage of tests and

spent another small fortune with health professionals. We had a very early miscarriage. The hope and disappointment of that part of the journey was devastating. This was beginning to get emotionally and physically tiresome.

After about 6 years we decided to explore IVF. My wife was very hesitant about the invasive procedures, so we only engaged in the initial hormone medications. These had such a destabilising impact on my wife's sense of wellbeing that we had to stop.

All the while, I was the pastor of my local church. I was preaching sermons about the faithfulness of God. At the same time, I was crying out to God in the quietness of the night, pleading that God might be faithful to me in this journey of having a family.

I began to think from my reading of the scriptures that being unable to have children was akin to being accursed by God. I began to ask God whether there was something my wife or I had done, or needed to

do, that we had not done? Had we unwittingly committed a terrible sin?

When this cry went unanswered I could not help moving on to questions of whether my plight was even of interest to God (did God not care?). Then I questioned God's power – was this petition beyond God's reach?!

Finally, in desperation, I went to the darkest of all places. God, are you even there at all?

Surprisingly, it was in this most desperate place that I received the only answer that could satisfy me. In the stillness of silence within the innermost places of my being, I received a deep conviction that even if I were counted among the 'accursed', God was with me.'

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Graham's personal story link in with Jesus' journey in the wilderness?
2. Do you relate to the personal story in any way?
3. Jesus was sent out into the wilderness, then called to action – can you give an example of this in your own life?
4. Can you give an example of your own desert experience, one where you had to let go of something?
5. What have you gone through in the past in order to let go of something in your life that no longer served you?
6. What helps you to feel closer to God?
7. Since the desert is a transforming experience, how do you feel as you anticipate your own personal desert over the next 40 days?
8. How do you imagine God speaks to you about determining your own mission?



Prayer is not asking.
Prayer is putting oneself
in the hands of God, at His
disposition, and listening to
His voice in the depths
of our hearts.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta

CLOSING PRAYER

Read by all

Prayer of St Francis

Lord, make me an
instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred,
let me sow love
Where there is injury,
pardon
Where there is doubt,
faith
Where there is despair,
hope
Where there is darkness,
light
Where there is sadness, joy.
O divine Master, grant
That I may not so much
seek
To be consoled,
as to console
To be understood,
as to understand
To be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving
that we receive
It is in pardoning
that we are pardoned
It is in dying
that we are born
to eternal life.

REFLECTING ON THE TEXT – WHAT IS LECTIO DIVINA?

There are many variations of Lectio Divina, but below is one way adapted from Francis J. Moloney SDB, (in *A Friendly Guide to the New Testament*, Garratt Publishing, 2010), and also from the Jesuit and Benedictine traditions.

If you wish, put a prayer or crucifix or a candle on a table to help you focus as you invoke the Holy Spirit in prayer. All of the activities listed below are optional. Choose the ones that feel right for you.

Start with an opening prayer, such as 'Come Holy Spirit, awaken us to hear your word.'

1. **Lectio** – Read the chosen text several times and note what phrases or words stand out to you or raise questions. Listen for the still, small voice that speaks to you.
2. **Meditatio** – meditate in silence for 10-20 minutes.
3. **Oratio** – Find out something about the text, perhaps by reading a commentary or guide; or

reflect on the meaning of the text to find what it is actually saying. You may share your findings if you are part of a group.

4. **Contemplatio** – Pray and ponder on the text. Is the Word offering something pointed, or challenging you in some way? Contemplate the text. You can spend another quiet few minutes here.

5. **Evangelizatio** – Make a commitment to take the message out to the world you live in.

6. **Ruminatio** – continue to ponder on the Word; take it with you and let it stay in your mind.

Read, Understand,
Reflect, Pray,
Be Still, Respond,
Ponder.
Reading of the
Sacred Word;
Divine Reading.

