



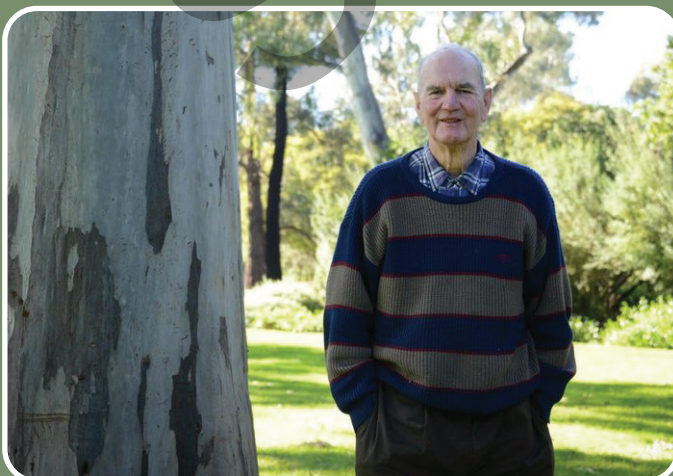
# Many paths lead to Easter

**Andy Hamilton SJ**

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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## *The Making of Lent*

Lent has a long history. At its heart is the central Christian belief that God has forgiven our sins and given us life through the death and rising of Jesus. In the second century, Christians dedicated a special feast to celebrate the dying and rising of Jesus. The gospels describe Jesus' death as taking place during the Jewish feast of the Passover, which recalled God's freeing them from slavery in Egypt. It was natural for them to celebrate the feast of Jesus' saving death at the same time.

From the beginning, the feast also involved a month of fasting, which was a regular part of Jewish (and later of Christian) practice.

Fasting marked seriousness. It was associated with acknowledging sin and communal renewal of faith.

The length of this fast was influenced by key stories in Scripture. The people of Israel spent forty years in the desert before entering the Promised Land. This story is mirrored in the gospel description of Jesus fasting and praying in the desert for forty days before beginning his public ministry. In time the fast was lengthened to forty days, so beginning on Wednesday.

By the fourth century CE, the Roman Empire came to tolerate Christianity, and the feast of Jesus' death and Resurrection expanded to

include celebration of Jesus' last days from his entrance to Jerusalem, to the Last Supper, imprisonment, and crucifixion. The ceremonies of the Church in Jerusalem were gradually adopted by the rest of the Church.

The liturgy of Lent was also linked to the Sacrament of Confession, in which people confessed publicly serious sins and dressed in sackcloth and ashes before being received back into the Church at Easter. This history is reflected in the sombre colours of Lent and in the sprinkling of ashes on Ash Wednesday. People entering the Church also prepared during Lent for their Baptism which was celebrated at Easter.



Loving God  
Our Lent is not a solitary thing  
But is woven from many  
journeys:  
Your carrying us from making to  
remaking;  
Israel's journey from slavery  
to the Promised Land;  
Jesus' mission to show and tell,  
To live, to love, to die and rise;  
Our own long trail from shadow  
into light;  
Our common travelling with  
Christ to God  
the end of all our journeys.



# The Many Journeys of Lent

We often imagine Lent as about ourselves. It is a time to drink less or pray more, for example. It is about ourselves. But more importantly it reminds us that as we head towards Easter our journey is one of many. It is a time to remember freshly what we have seen and wondered at in all these journeys.

Above them all is God's journey of making the world, accompanying it, saving it through God's Son Jesus, and staying with us still. God's journey with us is caught in the stories and reflections of the Scriptures. They were written to remember God's encounter with us.

The liturgy of Lent is focused on Jesus' journey, allowing us to walk with him on his mission with its surprises, leading in the last week to his entry into Jerusalem, his death and his rising through which we are saved. The Gospels and ceremonies of Lent invite us to remember sharply the story of Jesus that can easily grow dull.

In his journey, Jesus as a

devout Jew focused on God's choice of the Jewish people, his promise to them, and the fulfilment of that promise in leading them out of Egypt into the promised land. Jesus both reminded his hearers of that promise and showed it was completed in his life. Remembering the journey of God with the Jewish people is also central in Lent.

Lent also allows us to remember and meet people who have reflected deeply on Jesus' journey and God's presence to us. The liturgy of Lent allows us to walk with St Paul, who was knocked off his horse by God's love shown in the shaming death of Christ, that changed everything.

Our path to Easter is one of memory. It is a personal journey in which we are encouraged to remember the times when we have been struck with wonder and gratitude at God's love for us and at the world that Jesus opens to us. It is a time for rediscovering the surprise of faith and of Jesus' way.

Our journey with Jesus

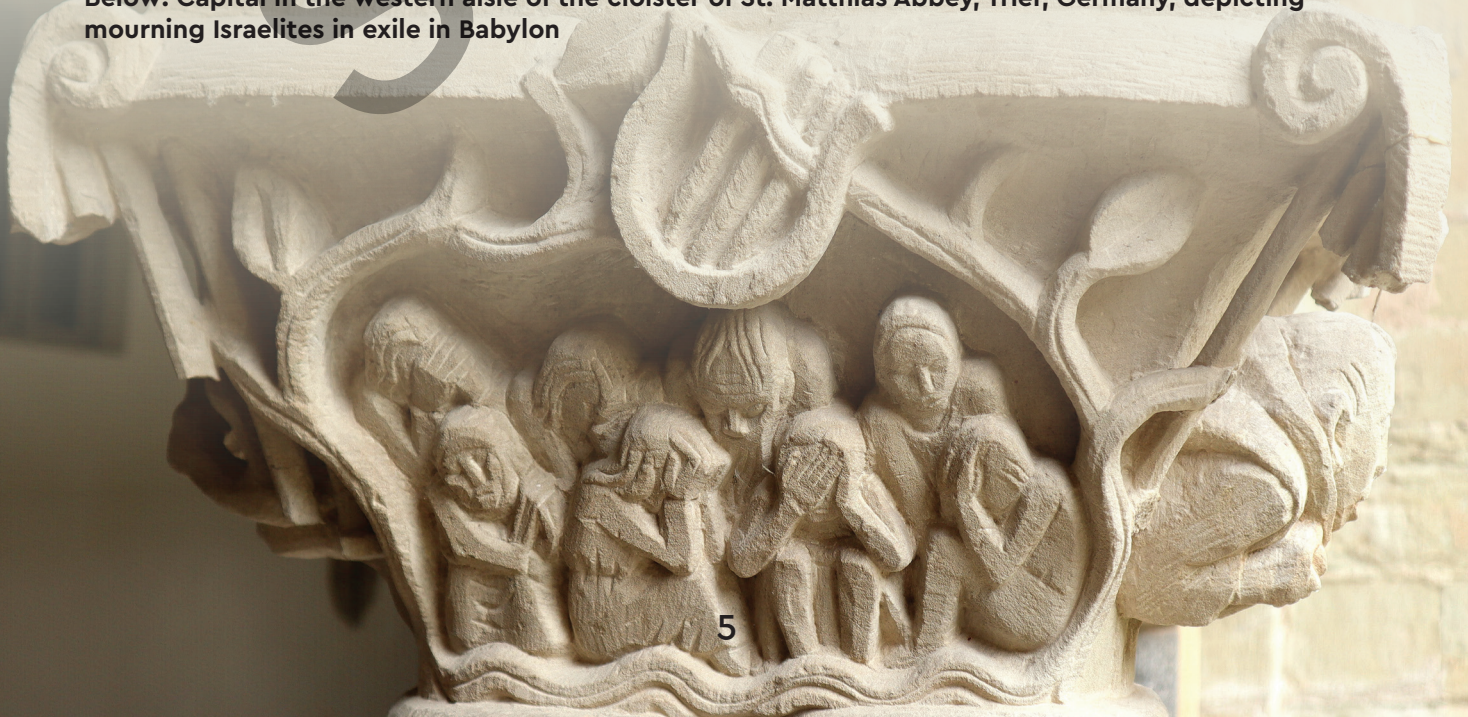
through Lent is a personal journey. But it is not a solitary or an individualistic journey. We do not walk alone but in company with our fellow Christians – both in our local churches but also to the whole great crowd of followers whom Christ has gathered together in the Church. The readings and prayers of the liturgy link us to special groups of Christians who through the history of the Church have had an important place in Lent.

In the early Church, Lent allowed public sinners to reflect on sin and to seek pardon. We know that we are like them, and the prayers of Lent encourage us to remember God's love for us in our sinfulness and to pray for a new heart.

In the Liturgy of Lent the preparation of adults for Baptism has an important part. As we walk with them, we remember the gift of our own Baptism.

The readings and prayers of Lent bring together these many journeys as we follow Jesus on his mission and path to Easter.

**Below: Capital in the western aisle of the cloister of St. Matthias Abbey, Trier, Germany, depicting mourning Israelites in exile in Babylon**



## READINGS FROM LUKE'S GOSPELS

For us Luke's Gospel keeps our eyes fixed on Jesus' path to Good Friday and Easter. Luke describes a hospitable Jesus in his relationships with God his Father, with his disciples, with demons, and with the Jewish religious authorities. He shows how, in Jesus, God fulfilled the promises made to the Jewish people and remains with us in the Church.



## OLD TESTAMENT READINGS

The Old Testament readings also describe a journey. In this journey God gathers the Jewish people through Abraham, rescues them from slavery in Egypt through Moses, brings them into the Promised Land, stays with them when they are driven into exile, and reassures them through the prophets as they return from exile.



## READINGS FROM PAUL'S LETTERS

In St Paul's letters he reflects on what faith in Jesus means to him and to us. His encounter with Jesus changed his life dramatically. As a devout Jew he had thought of God rewarding us for our faithful following of the details of Moses' Law. He discovered a God whose love was shown in Jesus dying outside the Law and asked only a loving faith from us.



## QUESTIONS AND SPARKS FOR REFLECTION

Lent invites us to reflect on our own journey of life as we walk with Jesus. To help us deepen our understanding of what Jesus' path means for our own journey, we include questions on each week's readings, and a prayer that echoes the message of the gospel. We also include quotations from Christians of different eras to spark in our minds and hearts.



## *Mapping the Journey*

Jesus, you explore the paths  
of your ministry,  
sending back the flashy and intimidating:  
the free meals and  
bit left over for yourself,  
the Armani suit and tie of power,  
the building of a megachurch.

Each time you choose  
the unprotected  
following of God's path.  
We thank you for your simplicity.

This Lent, may we too ask,  
to follow unencumbered  
where God leads us.

LUKE 4:1-13

*Jesus left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit through the wilderness, being tempted there by the devil for forty days.*

The journey of Lent is one of self-knowledge, reflection and finding God's way. The first week prepares us for the journey. It invites us to join Jesus at the beginning of his mission to preach God's coming. Luke reminds us that the Holy Spirit remains with Jesus at his baptism, in his time in the desert and afterwards. The Spirit also accompanies us on our journey.

Jesus' time of preparation was rugged. The Spirit leads him into the desert, a dangerous place where one is without resources when confronted by demons and wild animals. He stayed there for forty days, calling to mind the forty years that the people of Israel spent in the desert before entering the Promised Land. There they were constantly tested and often failed to follow God's call.

In the desert Jesus was tempted by Satan to act in ways that would be inconsistent with his mission. Luke's

Satan is smooth, not scary. He is very reasonable, sees what Jesus needs and wants to do for God. He presents Jesus with options that are attractive and appear to fit in with his mission. The understanding of mission that lies behind each option, however, is inconsistent with God's path for Jesus. It would take Jesus along Satan's way and not along God's way. To justify it, Satan supports each proposal with Scriptural passages.

In each case Jesus answers him sharply with another appeal to Scripture that cuts deeper. In doing this, he reveals the uncompromising demands of God's will for him. Jesus remembers his Father who has called him, and why he has been called. This echoes God's calling of Israel to be the chosen people.

The Devil first notices Jesus' hunger at the end of the forty days of fasting. He reminds Jesus that he is the one chosen by God; he has special gifts. He invites Jesus to use these special gifts to turn the stones into loaves of bread – Jesus would then be using his ministry to satisfy his own needs. Unhesitatingly Jesus replies that life is about larger things than satisfying hunger.

The Devil's second temptation is grandiose. As the power behind this world's rulers, he takes Jesus to a hilltop, shows him all the empires of the world and offers





# FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

him conquest of them if he worships Satan by following his way. Jesus quotes Scripture to follow only God's way, not one of power.

The Devil's third temptation is subtle. He tempts Jesus to throw himself down from the top of the Temple, confident that angels would rescue him. He is to take the initiative and force God's hand in a spectacular action that would win people over. At one level it seems that the temptation is to trust God, but at a deeper level it is to force God's hand. Jesus answers curtly that this would be to mistrust God as the Israelites had done in the desert.

Having failed for now, the Devil will return at the climax of the gospel when Jesus faces a cruel death.

Jesus' preparation for his mission speaks to our own preparation for the journey to Easter. The temptations ask what matters and who matters to Jesus. They show how deep and subtle can be the challenges we can face in following God's call to us. They also show how simple is the faithful response to them, and that we needn't be afraid of the Devil.

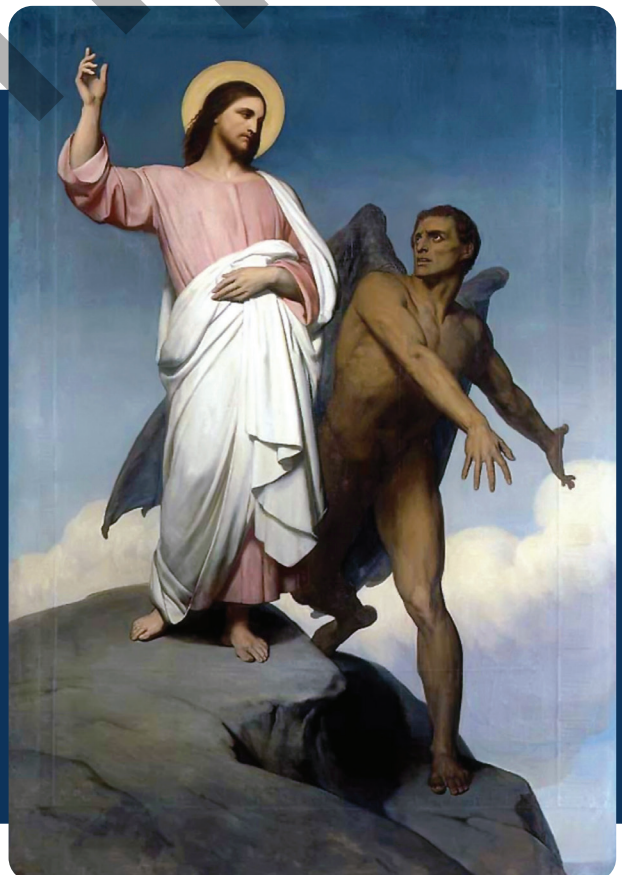
We can trust in the guidance of the Spirit to find our way through life. To help us remain open to the Spirit, Jesus asks us to be honest and trusting and to remember where in our lives we have found God.

## Reflection Starters

1. What do you want most for yourself most deeply this Lent?
2. What thoughts and situations divert you most easily from seeking what you want?
3. To Jesus, Moses and Paul, remembering what God had done and said were very important. What has been important in your own relationship with God?
4. Jesus expected Satan to come again to tempt him. Have you faced challenging times in your relationship to God?

**I'm not at all afraid of the devils in hell. They will be afraid of me. I don't understand these kinds of fear. We say, 'the devil, the devil', when we should say, 'God! God!', and making the devil quail. We know he can't move a finger without the Lord's permission. What are we thinking about? I'm certainly more afraid of people who are scared of the devil than I am of the devil himself.**

*Teresa of Avila*



Left: *Christ in the Wilderness* by Ivan Kramskoi, 1872  
Right: *The Temptation of Christ* by Ary Scheffer, 1854

Mapping the Journey

Jesus, you explore the paths of your ministry, sending back the flashy and intimidating: the free meals and bit left over for yourself, the Armani suit and tie of power, the building of a megachurch. Each time you choose the unprotected following of God's path. We thank you for your simplicity. This Lent, may we too ask, to follow unnumbered where God leads us.

Journey's End Promised

Jesus, you had talked the talk and walked the walk, called your friends and made your foes, and glimpsed the cross that lay in wait. This day you shine in all your glory with the ancient man of promise. When we grow weary in the dust of our lives, may we, too, touch the fringes of your glory and walk happily with you through ash and dust and death. To life with you.

Hard yards

Jesus, when we tread a weary path, we often think your sun should shine upon the just, and storms unroof the faithless. But you walked with open eyes to your death, from which life sprung up again. Help us to see sunshine and rain as places of your presence, and to glimpse the mystery that good people suffer, and life can come from death.

God walks the extra mile

Jesus, we thank you that your Father is our Father, always walking up the dusty road up to the gate, hoping one day that he may see us coming and meet us with delight. We thank you, too, that you do come out to meet us when we flounce off in the sulks. You wear our fury and win us back. What joy to know you act like this to us - Lord, help our unbelief.

Sinners are Welcomed

Jesus, when you asked the sinless to come forward, I thrilled to see those mean men fade away and leave the sinful woman alone. And when you greeted her and let her look you in the eye, and wished her well, I saw how your Father loves us sinners. Help us not to pile on others.

No Turning Back

Jesus, this week we see in you your Father's story of love, of pain, of taking on our sins, of rescue. This week we see in you your human story of faithfulness, of trusting in light in the deepest darkness, of attending to the thief who hung with you, of accepting death in your love for us, of forgiving. This week help us to follow your way and find life in you.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

LUKE 4:1-13

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit through the wilderness, being tempted there by the devil for forty days. On the third day, he was hungry and at the end of the third day, he was hungry and at the end of the third day, he was hungry...

READINGS FOR LENT YEAR C

ROMANS 10:8-13

Sinners here, this word that is the faith we proclaim, is in your hearts and in your mouths. If you believe with your heart that God raised his Son from the dead, then you will be saved.

GENESIS 15:5-12

God spoke to Abram and said, 'I am the Lord, who is to be feared. You are to be circumcised on the seventh day, and you shall be a covenant people.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

GOSPEL: LUKE 9:28-36

Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. He prayed, and his clothing became brilliant as lightning.

DEUTERONOMY 26:10-15

Moses said to the people: 'The Lord has brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. This is the year of our jubilee, and we have obeyed the Lord's voice.

PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11

Paul and Timothy thank God for you always, because you have become partners in his joy. You have been obedient to the gospel, and you have been able to stand firm.

EXODUS 3:1-8; 13:15

Moses was looking after the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, priest of Midian. He had his flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

LUKE 13:6-9

Jesus told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard and he came looking for fruit on it but found none.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

LUKE 15:1-3; 11-32

The tax collectors and the sinners were all seeking the company of Jesus, and he was eating and drinking with them.

1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-6

I want to remind you how our fathers were all guided by a cloud above them and they all passed through the sea.

PHILIPPIANS 3:8-14

I believe nothing can happen that will outweigh the immense advantage of knowing Christ Jesus, who has made me his own.

