‘Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God’s deepening life in me.’

—St Ignatius Loyola, Spiritual Exercises
Into the deep

AN INTRODUCTION

We live in a world that often prioritises the ephemeral and the superficial over more meaningful and enduring values. Countless distractions keep us from candid self-examination or quiet contemplation. For weeks or even months at a time, we hurtle along, richocheting from one thing to the next, fretting over minor dramas at work or home, compulsively checking our phones or binging on TV shows, barely holding it all together. Sometimes it feels as though we are just skimming across the surface—fragmented, preoccupied—until life intervenes in the form of a tragedy or personal crisis and we are pulled up short, suddenly discovering that the things on which we’ve squandered our days and energy are not what really matter.

Through all this, we are loved by a God who longs for deep relationship with us—indeed, who created us for just such a relationship and, as the Easter story reveals, will go to extraordinary, heartbreaking lengths to restore us to the divine embrace. The poet Denise Levertov begins her poem ‘On a theme by Thomas Merton’ with God’s call to Adam in the garden: ‘Adam, where are you?’ But the Adam of the poem is unresponsive, inattentive and confused, distracted by shallow spectacle and competing demands on his attention:

...Fragmented, he is not present to himself. God suffers the void that is his absence.

There are times in our lives when God feels distant or absent. But as Levertov suggests, perhaps it is not God who is absent from us, but we who make ourselves absent from God—and consequently from our true selves. Through careless inattention and destructive self-absorption, we create the ‘void’ that God suffers.

Through this season of Lent, we journey towards the cross, where Christ plumbs the depths of this human void and overcomes it. We are invited to turn away from all that distracts us and to reorient ourselves towards God; to examine and reintegrate our lives by focusing on divine rather than human priorities; to plunge into the deep, restorative waters of God’s love and mercy. And we are offered beautiful, ancient tools to help us enter into this gracious season of reflection and preparation—tools of prayerfulness, simplicity and generosity. These Lenten practices help us to think more deeply about God and about how we might respond to God’s tender, insistent call: ‘Beloved, where are you?’

So let us clear some time and space from distractions this Lent so that we might go deeper: deeper into the paschal mystery, deeper into relationship with God, deeper into truth and life.

LENT READINGS

This year, the readings for the Sundays in Lent are drawn from Year A of the Lectionary cycle.

The gospel readings for the Sundays in Lent, Year A, are as follows:

• First Sunday of Lent
  Matthew 4:1–11
  The temptation of Jesus as he is led by the Spirit through the wilderness

• Second Sunday of Lent
  Matthew 17:1–9
  The transfiguration of Jesus

• Third Sunday of Lent
  John 4:5–42
  The story of the Samaritan woman at the well

• Fourth Sunday of Lent
  John 9:1–41
  The story of the healing of the blind man

• Fifth Sunday of Lent
  John 11:1–45
  The story of the raising of Lazarus

• Passion/Palm Sunday
  Matthew 27:11–54
  The story of Jesus’ passion

SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

These prayer sheets take the weekly gospel as the focus and are suitable for individual or group use. The short reflections provided in response to each gospel explore how these stories might speak to our contemporary experience. These reflections are also available to download and listen to weekly on the Melbourne Catholic podcast channel (https://soundcloud.com/melbournecatholic).

A template for a weekly journal is also available, and this may also assist with personal reflection.
GATHERING PRAYER

God of the depths,
As we journey into this season of Lent,
may the disciplines of prayer, simplicity and generosity
lead to deeper knowledge of you
so that we might recognise and respond to your voice
more readily.
Amen.

GOSPEL

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Be careful not to parade your
good deeds before men to attract their notice; by doing
this you will lose all reward from your Father in heaven.
So when you give alms, do not have it trumpeted before
you; this is what the hypocrites do in the synagogues and
in the streets to win men’s admiration. I tell you solemnly,
they have had their reward. But when you give alms, your
left hand must not know what your right is doing; your
almsgiving must be secret, and your Father who sees all
that is done in secret will reward you.

‘And when you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites:
they love to say their prayers standing up in the
synagogues and at the street corners for people to see
them. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward.
But when you pray, go to your private room and, when
you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that
secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in
secret will reward you.

‘When you fast do not put on a gloomy look as the
hypocrites do: they pull long faces to let men know they
are fasting. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward.
But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your
face, so that no one will know you are fasting except your
Father who sees all that is done in secret; and your Father
who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.’

—Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18

The Gospel of the Lord.

BE STILL

• Light a candle as a reminder of God’s presence.
• You may wish to have a bowl of ashes as a prayer focus.
• Take a moment to let go of the work of the day or any
worries that may be at front of mind.

SING OR LISTEN

‘O Lord, hear my prayer’ (Taizé) (AOV1 17, GA 431) or
‘Hosea (Come back to me)’ (AOV1 30, CWB 715, G 484,
GA 213) or ‘Return to God’ (CWBII 298, G 478, GA 304).

The ash that marks our foreheads today reminds us of our
vulnerability and brokenness.

We want to avoid suffering, death, sin, ashes.
But we live in a world crushed and broken and torn,
a world God Himself visited to redeem.
We receive his poured-out life, and being allowed
the high privilege of suffering with Him,
may then pour ourselves out for others.

—Elizabeth Elliot, A Lamp unto my Feet

The Gospel of the Lord.
REFLECT

Lent offers an invitation to actively re-orientate ourselves to God: because for Christians, God, and the one who was so loved Jesus, is the heart and the soul of life. We are offered this gracious time when we can reflect on what has formed us since we tread last year’s Lenten path. And we are offered beautifully ancient tools to assist us with entering into this time. Tools of being prayerful, of living more simply and living more generously. The wonderful gift of the Lord’s merciful love is offered in a special way in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Lent is a most appropriate time to receive this healing sacrament.

So, let us commence our Lenten pilgrimage. Let us embark on a journey that will allow us to enter more fully into the cycle of the paschal mystery as it plays itself out in our lives and in the world. A journey that encourages us in our search for meaning and truth. A journey of returning to our God.

RESPOND

Today, we pray in the ancient words of the psalmist:

Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness,
In your compassion blot out my offence.
O wash me more and more from my guilt
and cleanse me from my sin.

Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

—Psalm 50:3–4 (with response)
FIRST WEEK OF LENT

BE STILL

• Light a candle as a reminder of God’s presence.
• A visual reminder of wilderness, with a collection of greenery as a prayer focus, may assist with this week’s reflection.
• Take a moment to allow whatever is in your heart to rise, and offer your thoughts to the loving care of the Lord today.

SING OR LISTEN

‘O Lord, hear my prayer’ (Taizé) (AOV1 17, GA 431) or ‘Hosea (Come back to me)’ (AOV1 30, CWB 715, G 484, GA 213) or ‘Return to God’ (CWBII 298, G 478, GA 304).

GATHERING PRAYER

God of the depths,
As we embark on this Lenten journey,
draw us nearer to you.
Still our hearts and minds, that they may become more attentive to the deep promptings of your Spirit.
Amen.

GOSPEL

A reading from the gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, after which he was very hungry, and the tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to turn into loaves.’ But he replied, ‘Scripture says:

Man does not live on bread alone
but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’
The devil then took him to the holy city and made him stand on the parapet of the Temple. ‘If you are the Son of God’ he said ‘throw yourself down; for scripture says:

He will put you in his angels’ charge,
and they will support you on their hands
in case you hurt your foot against a stone.’
Jesus said to him, ‘Scripture also says:

You must not put the Lord your God to the test.’
Next, taking him to a very high mountain, the devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. ‘I will give you all these’ he said, ‘if you fall at my feet and worship me.’ Then Jesus replied, ‘Be off, Satan! For scripture says:

You must worship the Lord your God,
and serve him alone.’
Then the devil left him, and angels appeared and looked after him.

The Gospel of the Lord.

—Matthew 4:1–11

POUNDER THE WORD

After the first reading, what words or phrases struck you from this passage?

Re-read the gospel. Take a moment of silence to reflect upon how God is speaking through this text. Noting down some responses to the following may assist with reflection:

I think about my life:

• What is God asking me to listen to?
• What does God want me to pay attention to?
• What is God prompting, directing, leading and guiding me to in this reading?

I think about my community and the world:

• What is God asking of us at this time?
• What is God wanting us to attend to in our community and our world?
• What is God prompting, directing, leading and guiding us towards?
REFLECT

The wilderness is generally considered to be a place of isolation, even deprivation, and we tend to measure personal success by the very opposite—by activity and possessions, wealth, pleasure, even the number of friends or “likes” that we accumulate. Yet the wilderness experience prompts us to abandon such measures and falsehoods and to encounter our true, raw selves. The contemporary secular movements of mindfulness and minimalism are ways of approximating the positive dimension of the wilderness experience. It is clear that many in our world, especially the young, yearn for this.

Note that in this passage Jesus is led by the Spirit; so this time of testing is part of God’s plan. Then, at the conclusion of his time in the wilderness, the angels ‘suddenly came and waited on him’. These supernatural elements affirm the presence of God during this time of testing. Note also that the Spirit leads Jesus through the wilderness, not simply to it. The wilderness is not a destination to arrive at; it is an experience to go and grow through. This resonates with times in life when we are challenged, even tested—through loneliness, insecurity, doubt, grief, even significant decision-making. These are the times when the distractions of life are put in perspective or removed all together, when all is laid bare; ironically, these are also the times when my prayer life seems at its deepest and the presence of God is palpable. These times are not ‘life-taking’ but rather life-giving; not so much moments of break-down as moments of break-through. So, while I do not seek such ‘wilderness’ experiences, I know that I need them to remind me of my dependence on my God and the need for humility and compassion in my life. Experience has taught me that God’s Spirit is with me and leads me through the wilderness.

So, during this season of Lent, embrace the wilderness moments—whether they are by choice or imposed—using them to discern how you are called to serve God’s mission. Reflect too on the example of Jesus and what the three temptations he confronts might teach us about self-sufficiency, power, influence and control. Succumbing to these individualistic temptations puts distance between God and ourselves, between ourselves and the rest of humanity. With each temptation, Jesus responds with faith in God; what better example could we have?

Reflection provided by Ria Greene

PRAY

Lord, as we travel deeper into the wilderness, show us our need of you, and teach us to listen attentively to the quiet voice of your Spirit in our lives.

Amen.

‘Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God’s deepening life in me.’
—St Ignatius Loyola, Spiritual Exercises

DURING THE WEEK

What is God calling me to in my prayer?
What is God prompting me to fast from?
Where is God guiding me to respond in generosity?

WEEKLY POCKET PRAYER

‘No one lives on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’

I pray that I may hear God’s voice as I journey through each day.
BE STILL

- Light a candle as a reminder of God’s presence.
- An icon of Jesus may provide a visual prayer focus for this week.
- Take a moment to allow whatever is in your heart to rise, and offer your thoughts to the loving care of the Lord today.

SING OR LISTEN

‘O Lord, hear my prayer’ (Taizé) (AOV1 17, GA 431) or ‘Hosea (Come back to me)’ (AOV1 30, CWB 715, G 484, GA 213) or ‘Return to God’ (CWBII 298, G 478, GA 304).

GATHERING PRAYER

God of the depths,
As we travel further into this season of Lent, illuminate our lives and the world around us with your bright, transforming presence.
Amen.

GOSPEL

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain where they could be alone. There in their presence he was transfigured: his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light. Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them; they were talking with him. Then Peter spoke to Jesus. ‘Lord,’ he said ‘it is wonderful for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’ He was still speaking when suddenly a bright cloud covered them with shadow, and from the cloud there came a voice which said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favour. Listen to him.’ When they heard this the disciples fell on their faces overcome with fear. But Jesus came up and touched them. ‘Stand up,’ he said ‘do not be afraid.’ And when they raised their eyes they saw no one but only Jesus.

As they came down from the mountain Jesus gave them this order, ‘Tell no one about the vision until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.’

—Matthew 17:1–9

The Gospel of the Lord.
REFLECT

The transfiguration is one of those mystical moments beyond the ordinary—an awesome encounter with God. Here we see the famous scene: Peter represents faith. It is upon that rock, upon Peter, who was firm in faith, that Christ built his church. We see James, who shows us the virtue of hope, the first of the apostles to lay down his life for the Lord. And John, the model of Love, the beloved disciple, who reclined on the breast of Jesus at the last supper, hearing the Sacred Heart—that human heart that was filled with divine love—beat before it was pierced and unleashed that axis-shifting torrent of Love and an ocean of mercy for us upon the cross.

Elijah and Moses also appear with Jesus. Elijah the prophet, who stood upon Mt Horeb and encountered God not in the fire, nor the earthquake, but in the silence and still, small breeze... who called the people to turn back to God and not set their hearts on idols that cannot fill our restless longing for God. Moses the lawgiver, who ascended Mt Sinai and was given the law to guide the life of God’s people so that they may be a light to the nations and draw those same nations towards God.

In the centre of it all is Jesus Christ, his hand raised in blessing, his eyes fixed on us. What awe, what an experience of the divine: who would not want to stay there? It is indeed wonderful to experience Jesus and to feel so close and wrapped up in the wonder of the faith—whether it is at the Australian Catholic Youth Festival, a retreat, on pilgrimage, even in our personal prayer. These are the mountain-top experiences—those moments we wish would last forever.

But we are not called to stay there. We have to go down the mountain. We can’t just stay with the awe-filled and amazing, because that is not where we are called to be, nor is that what our mission is. We are called to come down from the mountain, to dive back into the boring, the routine, the mundane, and to bring Jesus with us to those who need him.

The mountain-top experiences help prepare us to go down the mountain into the mission-field. They are there to help stoke the fires of faith, of charity and zeal in our hearts, so that we may spread that flame of his to the ends of the earth, often grown cold with apathy and ignorance. You don’t come down the mountain alone; you walk every step of the way with Jesus, the Father’s beloved Son, the same transfigured and glorious Lord you encountered up there. He never left you.

Reflection provided by Fr Nathan Rawlins

PRAY

God of mercy,

Strengthen us in our desire to continue on the Lenten journey with Jesus by living more prayerfully, simply and generously.

Amen.

During the Week

What is God calling me to in my prayer?

What is God prompting me to fast from?

Where is God guiding me to respond in generosity?

Weekly Pocket Prayer

‘It is your face, O Lord, that I seek; hide not your face from me.’

I pray that I may have the grace and insight to pay attention to God’s active presence in my life.