

*The covenanting God  
draws near*

*Lenten Studies  
on the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

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*Illuminating Faith*

## About *Illuminating Faith*

Illuminating Faith is a Christian educational ministry auspiced by the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist, North Melbourne, Australia. Reflecting the Congregation's own interest in thinking deeply about Christian faith, these studies offer a range of different reflections on Christian confession intended both to illuminate that faith, and to show how Christian faith can itself be illuminating. The study materials derive from a range of different sources and will appear in an increasing range of styles. The congregation as a whole contributes through study groups in which the material is tested, in proof-reading, by composing questions small groups might consider when using the studies, and in giving its minister time to oversee the project. For more information, further studies, to provide feedback or to discover ways of supporting this ministry see:

[www.marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au/illuminating-faith](http://www.marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au/illuminating-faith).

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## About these Studies

These studies began as a resource to assist small groups in a local congregation to reflect together on the set texts of the Revised Common Lectionary for the first five weeks of Lent in Year C, and are shared in the hope that they might be useful to others in the same way. They will assist group members in preparing to hear the readings on the coming Sunday. If Sunday's preacher is a member of such a group, she or he will also be assisted by hearing our others in the group react to the readings, and so suggesting how they might be handled in the sermon and liturgy.

The RCL texts for each week are provided, with a focus question for reflection – although there may well be other themes which your group wishes to pursue. It may also be too time consuming to deal with all the texts in a single session, and IT might be preferable to begin with the texts (if known) the preacher intends for a focus on the coming Sunday, or to focus on one of the series (Old Testament, epistle or Gospel) for each week.

Preparation prior to each study should include at least all members of your group reading the texts and marking anything of interest to them. Group members might also be assisted by referring to a lectionary commentary. One recommended printed resource is the three volume series 'Texts for Preaching'; reliable online commentary can be found on Bill Loader's pages (New Testament: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/lectionaryindex.html>) and Howard Wallace's pages (Old Testament: <http://hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au/index.html>)

The studies conclude with a short devotional which involves reading again the psalm for the study (responsively), the possibility of free prayer and concluding with a traditional collect for the coming Sunday.

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# LENT 1C

Deuteronomy 26.1-11

Romans 10.8b-13

Luke 4.1-13

Psalm 91.1-2, 9-16

## Preparing for the Study

*Read each of the set texts below, marking what interests, amuses or troubles you. If you have time, consult one of the lectionary commentary resources (printed or online) suggested in the introductory 'About these Studies'.*

### Old Testament - Deuteronomy 26.1-11

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, <sup>2</sup>you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. <sup>3</sup>You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, 'Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.' <sup>4</sup>When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, <sup>5</sup>you shall make this response before the LORD your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. <sup>6</sup>When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, <sup>7</sup>we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup>The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; <sup>9</sup>and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup>So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.' You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. <sup>11</sup>Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

*For reflection:*

Inheritance is the word used to denote the Israelites' possession of the land. This implies that they do not possess the land by virtue of their own efforts or rights, but as a gift of grace from God. The first fruits of the land bears witness to this grace, and its offering to God is an act of remembering and thanksgiving. Consider the gifts of God that we enjoy. How do we, in the life of our congregation, remember and give thanks for God's grace?

### **The Response - Psalm 91.1-2, 9-16**

<sup>1</sup> You who live in the shelter of the Most High,  
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,  
<sup>2</sup> will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress;  
my God, in whom I trust.'

<sup>9</sup> Because you have made the Lord your refuge,  
the Most High your dwelling-place,  
<sup>10</sup> no evil shall befall you,  
no scourge come near your tent.

<sup>11</sup> For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.  
<sup>12</sup> On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.  
<sup>13</sup> You will tread on the lion and the adder,  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

<sup>14</sup> Those who love me, I will deliver;  
I will protect those who know my name.  
<sup>15</sup> When they call to me, I will answer them;  
I will be with them in trouble,  
I will rescue them and honour them.  
<sup>16</sup> With long life I will satisfy them,  
and show them my salvation.

*For reflection:*

This psalm is used incorrectly by the devil in his third effort to tempt Jesus in Luke 4 – the temptation to put God to the test. How do we participate in the self-serving theology of the devil and, either knowingly or unwittingly, put God to the test?

### **The Epistle - Romans 10.8b-13**

...‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); <sup>9</sup>because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup>For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. <sup>11</sup>The scripture says, ‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame.’ <sup>12</sup>For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. <sup>13</sup>For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

*For reflection:*

The first quote is from Deuteronomy 30.14; the second quote is from Joel 2.32; and the third quote is from a variety of sources, including Psalm 25.3, Isaiah 28.16 and Isaiah 45.17. Salvation is mentioned three times in this passage, which emphasizes the significance of the witness of faith, confessing and believing in Jesus. Do you find this a helpful way of understanding the idea of salvation?

How might we translate the word ‘salvation’ into our current context?

### **The Gospel - Luke 4.1-13**

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup>where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The devil

said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." ' <sup>5</sup> Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.'<sup>8</sup>Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." ' <sup>9</sup> Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup>for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", <sup>11</sup>and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." ' <sup>12</sup>Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." ' <sup>13</sup>When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

*For reflection:*

Note the narrative context for this event: it takes place immediately after the baptism of Jesus and before the commencement of his public ministry. The forty days of temptation has strong Old Testament overtones: the story of Noah in Genesis 6-9 suggests that the flood continued for forty days, and Numbers 32.13 recalls how the Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness

Temptation 1. When the devil invites Jesus to use his power to turn a stone into bread, Jesus replies with a quote from Deuteronomy 8.3, recalling how Moses had taught the Israelites to trust that the Lord would provide sufficient manna to meet their needs each day in the wilderness.

Temptation 2. When the devil offers Jesus all the glory and authority on earth, Jesus replies with a quote from Deuteronomy 6.13 and 10.20, replacing the word 'fear' with 'worship'.

Temptation 3. When the devil assures Jesus that God would not allow him to come to harm, Jesus replies by quoting Psalm 91. The irony of this response is that God does not 'protect' Jesus from the cross.

Note how the devil departs from Jesus until an opportune time. For Luke, this 'opportune time' is not just about what happens to Jesus during his life (e.g., Luke 22.39-46); it is also about the



temptations that confront those who are called into the ministry of his love, i.e., members of the church.

In relation to the passages that Jesus quoted in response to the devil, what temptations confronting the church today do you feel are particularly difficult or powerful?

Consider the temptations you have noted above, and the temptations that Jesus faced, in relation to your congregation's current understanding of its calling. What are the dangers and opportunities in the plans you might be exploring?

## **Conclusion**

Read the psalm for this Sunday again, this time responsively in the group

Take a moment of quiet reflection together after the psalm.

Have someone offer prayers which seem appropriate given the conversation you have had, and then conclude with the following traditional collect for the coming Sunday:

Almighty God,  
whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan:  
Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations;  
and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us,  
let each one find you mighty to save;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen.



Genesis 15.1-12,17-18

Philippians 3.17-4.1

Luke 13.31-35

Psalm 27

## Preparing for the Study

*Read each of the set texts below, marking what interests, amuses or troubles you. If you have time, consult one of the lectionary commentary resources (printed or online) suggested in the introductory 'About these Studies'.*

### Old Testament - Genesis 15.1-12,17-18

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, 'do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.'<sup>2</sup> But Abram said, 'O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?'<sup>3</sup> And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.'<sup>4</sup> But the word of the LORD came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.'<sup>5</sup> He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'so shall your descendants be.'<sup>6</sup> And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

<sup>7</sup>Then he said to him, 'I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.'<sup>8</sup> But he said, 'O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?'<sup>9</sup> He said to him, 'Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.'<sup>10</sup> He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.<sup>11</sup> And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

<sup>12</sup>As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.<sup>13</sup> Then the LORD said to Abram, 'Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years;<sup>14</sup> but I will bring judgement on the nation that they serve, and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions.<sup>15</sup> As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you

shall be buried in a good old age. <sup>16</sup>And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.’

<sup>17</sup>When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. <sup>18</sup>On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates...

*For reflection:*

Consider the phrase, ‘the word of the Lord came to Abram’. In the Hebrew Scriptures this phrase is a common way of describing how people become aware of God’s presence and purposes. In this encounter, the word of the Lord comes to Abram in a vision, during which the promise of the Lord to bless Abram with descendants and a country of their own is confirmed by the making of a covenant.

In what ways are we blessed by the covenant that God has made with us in Jesus Christ?

### **The Response - Psalm 27**

*Of David.*

<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my light and my salvation;  
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;  
of whom shall I be afraid?

<sup>2</sup> When evildoers assail me  
to devour my flesh—  
my adversaries and foes—  
they shall stumble and fall.

<sup>3</sup> Though an army encamp against me,  
my heart shall not fear;  
though war rise up against me,  
yet I will be confident.

<sup>4</sup> One thing I asked of the LORD,  
that will I seek after:  
to live in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the LORD,  
and to inquire in his temple.

<sup>5</sup> For he will hide me in his shelter

in the day of trouble;  
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;  
he will set me high on a rock.

<sup>6</sup> Now my head is lifted up  
above my enemies all around me,  
and I will offer in his tent  
sacrifices with shouts of joy;  
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

<sup>7</sup> Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,  
be gracious to me and answer me!  
<sup>8</sup> 'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!'  
Your face, LORD, do I seek.  
<sup>9</sup> Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger,  
you who have been my help.  
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,  
O God of my salvation!  
<sup>10</sup> If my father and mother forsake me,  
the LORD will take me up.

<sup>11</sup> Teach me your way, O LORD,  
and lead me on a level path  
because of my enemies.  
<sup>12</sup> Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,  
for false witnesses have risen against me,  
and they are breathing out violence.

<sup>13</sup> I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD  
in the land of the living.  
<sup>14</sup> Wait for the LORD;  
be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
wait for the LORD!

*For reflection:*

This psalm claims to be authored by David, yet it mentions the house of the Lord as a temple, which suggests a later historical context (there was no temple in David's time). The psalmist says to the Lord, 'you speak in my heart'. Is this another form of the language noted in the Genesis passage about the word of the Lord coming to Abram? The psalmist describes evildoers, adversaries, enemies, false witnesses, those who speak malice, and even implies that he's been

forsaken by his father and mother. How might we interpret these forms of opposition for our own context?

### **The Epistle - Philippians 3.17-4.1**

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. <sup>18</sup>For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. <sup>19</sup>Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. <sup>20</sup>But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>21</sup>He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

<sup>4.1</sup>Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

#### *For reflection:*

The apostle Paul speaks of enemies of the cross of Christ, and contrasts them with those whose citizenship is in heaven. Does this suggest another way in which we might interpret the woes expressed in Psalm 27 (above)?

### **The Gospel - Luke 13.31-35**

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' <sup>32</sup>He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. <sup>33</sup>Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem." <sup>34</sup>Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! <sup>35</sup>See, your house

is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." '

*For reflection:*

It seems that the Pharisees will resort to any measure to get rid of Jesus, even hoping to scare him with tales of Herod's murderous intent. But Jesus is not deterred, and makes clear that his ministry is consistent with that of the prophets of old who were routinely persecuted for speaking God's word. Note the reference to those who are sent to Jerusalem. Our worship concludes as we are sent on the mission of Christ. To whom we are sent? Whom does Jesus wish to gather (like a hen gathering her chicks under her wings)? What does this suggest about the missional priorities of our congregation and the resources that are necessary?

## **Conclusion**

Read the psalm for this Sunday again, this time responsively in the group

Take a moment of quiet reflection together after the psalm.

Have someone offer prayers which seem appropriate given the conversation you have had, and then conclude with the following traditional collect for the coming Sunday:

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy:  
Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways,  
and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith  
to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word,  
Jesus Christ your Son;  
who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns,  
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

# LENT 3C

Isaiah 55.1-9  
1 Corinthians 10.1-13  
Luke 13.1-9  
Psalm 63.1-8

## Preparing for the Study

*Read each of the set texts below, marking what interests, amuses or troubles you.  
If you have time, consult one of the lectionary commentary resources (printed or online)  
suggested in the introductory 'About these Studies'.*

### Old Testament - Isaiah 55.1-9

Ho, everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and you that have no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without price.

<sup>2</sup> Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.

<sup>3</sup> Incline your ear, and come to me;  
listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,  
my steadfast, sure love for David.

<sup>4</sup> See, I made him a witness to the peoples,  
a leader and commander for the peoples.

<sup>5</sup> See, you shall call nations that you do not know,  
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,  
because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel,  
for he has glorified you.

<sup>6</sup> Seek the LORD while he may be found,  
call upon him while he is near;

<sup>7</sup> let the wicked forsake their way,  
and the unrighteous their thoughts;



let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

<sup>8</sup> For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

<sup>9</sup> For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

*For reflection:*

This passage reflects a period during which the people of Jerusalem had experienced great suffering (captivity in Babylon). God recalls the covenant love he shared with King David, and confirms that his covenant love for the people of Jerusalem will sustain them and restore their city. The phrase 'let them return to the Lord' is very close to what the gospels mean by the word 'repentance'. To what extent does our trust in God depend on our understanding of God's ways? Remember how the apostle Paul seemed content with a partial knowledge of God (1 Corinthians 13.9).

**The Response - Psalm 63.1-8**

*A Psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah.*

<sup>1</sup> O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

<sup>2</sup> So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,  
beholding your power and glory.

<sup>3</sup> Because your steadfast love is better than life,  
my lips will praise you.

<sup>4</sup> So I will bless you as long as I live;  
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

<sup>5</sup> My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,  
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips

<sup>6</sup> when I think of you on my bed,  
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

<sup>7</sup> for you have been my help,  
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

<sup>8</sup> My soul clings to you;  
your right hand upholds me.

*For reflection:*

This psalm is attributed to David when he was in the wilderness apparently trying to avoid his enemies. The reference to meditating on God ‘in the watches of the night’ suggests long sleepless night. While lamenting the absence of the presence of God, David recalls the worship that has sustained him in the past. This gives David hope and a desire to praise God, even though God seems far away. Recall stories from the gospels in which Jesus experiences the absence of the presence of God? In what ways do you experience such absence and what sustains you in those times? How does the practice of worship and prayer sustain you, even when God seems far away? In what way are the practices of worship and prayer acts of faith?

### **The Epistle - 1 Corinthians 10.1-13**

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,<sup>2</sup>and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,<sup>3</sup>and all ate the same spiritual food,<sup>4</sup>and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.<sup>5</sup>Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

<sup>6</sup>Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. <sup>7</sup>Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.’ <sup>8</sup>We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. <sup>9</sup>We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. <sup>10</sup>And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. <sup>11</sup>These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. <sup>12</sup>So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. <sup>13</sup>No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

*For reflection:*

This passage reflects the concern of the apostle Paul about the church in Corinth, whose members are confused and arguing about what is necessary for Christian discipleship. Paul recalls the story of the exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and overlays it with a

Christology; i.e., he interprets the problems at Corinth through the historical struggle of the Israelites in the wilderness, when they complained about lack of food and water, made idols to worship, and ignored the God who offered them new life.

In the first paragraph Paul indicates that God was not pleased with most of the Israelites. Paul does not actually claim that God struck them down, but notes that they suffered the consequences of their 'evil' (idolatry, immorality, lack of faith and grumbling).

Consider how the phrase 'God will not let you be tested beyond your strength' relates to the Lord's Prayer stanza: 'save us from the time of trial'.

### **The Gospel - Luke 13.1-9**

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>He asked them, 'do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?' <sup>3</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup>Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

<sup>6</sup>Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup>So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" <sup>8</sup>He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup>If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." '

#### *For reflection:*

Those who tell Jesus about the death of some Galileans assume that suffering is a sign of sin. Contrast this with the apostle Paul's teaching that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Romans 3.23). In response, Jesus declares that repentance (turning to God) is the path to life for all people. The linking of repentance with the unfruitful fig tree recalls the words of John the Baptist in Luke 3.8, 'Bear fruits worthy of repentance'.

In the story that immediately follows this passage, Jesus heals a woman who had been crippled for 18 years. This healing appears to be a sign of the fruitfulness that the parable seeks in the

fig tree. What might be the fruitfulness (i.e., the sign) that demonstrates our turning to God and our trust in God? Reflect on this in light of our current discernment journey.

## **Conclusion**

Read the psalm for this Sunday again, this time responsively in the group

Take a moment of quiet reflection together after the psalm.

Have someone offer prayers which seem appropriate given the conversation you have had, and then conclude with the following traditional collect for the coming Sunday:

Almighty God,  
you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves:  
Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls,  
that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body,  
and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Joshua 5.9-12  
2 Corinthians 5.16-21  
Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32  
Psalm 32

## Preparing for the Study

*Read each of the set texts below, marking what interests, amuses or troubles you. If you have time, consult one of the lectionary commentary resources (printed or online) suggested in the introductory 'About these Studies'.*

### Old Testament - Joshua 5.9-12

<sup>9</sup>The LORD said to Joshua, 'Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.' And so that place is called Gilgal to this day. <sup>10</sup>While the Israelites were encamped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. <sup>11</sup>On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. <sup>12</sup>The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

#### *For reflection:*

The 'disgrace' mentioned in this passage is a reference to the disobedience of the Israelites who fail to obey the law concerning circumcision throughout their 40 years in the wilderness. The Lord commands Joshua to circumcise those who had not been circumcised during that journey, and names the place Gilgal (meaning 'to roll') to signify that they have left their old lives of slavery and have now entered into the life and land promised to Abraham (the first to be circumcised as a sign of this promise). The fullness of this transition is symbolized in the cessation of the manna as the Israelites first eat of the bounty of the land.

The notion of a painful procedure like circumcision as a sign of God's covenant is not easily translated into our context. The apostle Paul suggests to the Romans that 'real circumcision is a matter of the heart – it is spiritual and not literal' (2.29). In his letter to the Colossians (2.11-12), he refers to spiritual circumcision as being buried with Christ in baptism (and raised with

him by faith). What do we do with our bodies and/or lives that signifies our participation in the fullness of God's promise in Christ?

## The Response - Psalm 32

*Of David. A Maskil.*

<sup>1</sup> Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.

<sup>2</sup> Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

<sup>3</sup> While I kept silence, my body wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.

<sup>4</sup> For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

*Selah*

<sup>5</sup> Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD',  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

*Selah*

<sup>6</sup> Therefore let all who are faithful  
offer prayer to you;  
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters  
shall not reach them.

<sup>7</sup> You are a hiding-place for me;  
you preserve me from trouble;  
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

*Selah*

<sup>8</sup> I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

<sup>9</sup> Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,  
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,  
else it will not stay near you.

<sup>10</sup> Many are the torments of the wicked,  
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

<sup>11</sup> Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

*For reflection:*

This psalm indicates a striking connection between personal suffering and the guilt of sin, and recognizes the importance of confession and forgiveness. The psalmist rejoices that we are set free from ignorance to embrace the mercy of God. When have you enjoyed the freedom to embrace the mercy of God?

### **The Epistle - 2 Corinthians 5.16-21**

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. <sup>17</sup>So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! <sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup>that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. <sup>20</sup>So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup>For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

*For reflection:*

This dense passage contains numerous significant claims by Paul: ‘if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation’; ‘God has given us the ministry of reconciliation’; ‘in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself’; God made Christ to be sin, so that in Christ we might become the righteousness of God’.

Given that Paul’s claims are the heart of the Gospel, how does your congregation embody them?

## The Gospel - Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

<sup>3</sup>So he told them this parable: There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup>A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ’ <sup>20</sup>So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup>Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup>But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup>And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup>Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup>But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ <sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’ ’



*For reflection:*

It is important to note that this is one of three parables that Jesus tells in response to the grumbling of the Pharisees about Jesus, that he ‘welcomes sinners and eats with them’. Jesus replies by telling three parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son (it is interesting to reflect on which of the sons is actually lost).

We tend to recall the first part of this parable (about the younger son) more than the second part (about the older son), but it is difficult to understand the parable unless we read the whole thing. When the younger son asks for his inheritance, he is in effect saying that his father is dead to him. This is deeply offensive in a patriarchal culture in which fathers are highly respected members of society. Yet the father grieves the departure of his son, and each day scans the horizon, awaiting his unlike return. When he does return, the father does something that was culturally unthinkable – he runs to embrace him. He justifies his prodigal (extravagant) behaviour: ‘this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ The parable then explains the implications of this salvation through the dialogue between the father and the older son, who is angry that his brother has been forgiven and restored. The older son refers to his brother as ‘this son of yours’, but the father responds by saying, ‘this brother of yours’.

This parable suggests a similar lesson to the parable in Matthew 20, in which a land owner pays every worker the same, no matter how long they had worked. In response to the complaints by those who had worked all day, the landowner says, ‘Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ The parable of the prodigal son is really about a prodigal father who, despite the cultural assumptions that condemn the younger son, chooses to behave with grace and forgiveness to restore and give life to the one who once was lost and dead.

What are your reflections on this well-known parable? How are you offended or challenged by the father’s prodigal behaviour?

## **Conclusion**

Read the psalm for this Sunday again, this time responsively in the group

Take a moment of quiet reflection together after the psalm.

Have someone offer prayers which seem appropriate given the conversation you have had, and then conclude with the following traditional collect for the coming Sunday:

Gracious Father,  
whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven  
to be the true bread which gives life to the world:  
Evermore give us this bread,  
that he may live in us, and we in him;  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen.

# LENT 5C

Isaiah 43.16-21  
Philippians 3.4b-14  
John 12.1-8  
Psalm 126

## Preparing for the Study

*Read each of the set texts below, marking what interests, amuses or troubles you.  
If you have time, consult one of the lectionary commentary resources (printed or online)  
suggested in the introductory 'About these Studies'.*

### Old Testament - Isaiah 43.16-21

<sup>16</sup> Thus says the LORD,  
who makes a way in the sea,  
a path in the mighty waters,  
<sup>17</sup> who brings out chariot and horse,  
army and warrior;  
they lie down, they cannot rise,  
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:  
<sup>18</sup> Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.  
<sup>19</sup> I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert.  
<sup>20</sup> The wild animals will honour me,  
the jackals and the ostriches;  
for I give water in the wilderness,  
rivers in the desert,  
to give drink to my chosen people,  
<sup>21</sup> the people whom I formed for myself  
so that they might declare my praise.

*For reflection:*

The historical context for this passage is the end of the Babylonian Captivity, and the return of the exiles to Jerusalem. By recalling the mighty act of God to bring Israel safely out of Egypt and through the waters in which their enemies are destroyed, the sense of judgment and dread in Isaiah 1-40 gives way to the new thing that the Lord will do for his people, that they might declare his praise. Strangely, this passage says 'do not remember the former things'. Can we anticipate God's 'new thing' if we don't remember the old?

### **The Response - Psalm 126**

*A Song of Ascents.*

<sup>1</sup> When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.

<sup>2</sup> Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,  
'The LORD has done great things for them.'

<sup>3</sup> The LORD has done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.

<sup>4</sup> Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

<sup>5</sup> May those who sow in tears  
reap with shouts of joy.

<sup>6</sup> Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.

*For reflection:*

This psalm (the basis of the 1874 gospel song 'Bringing in the sheaves') perfectly captures the response of the Israelites to the Lord's words in Isaiah 43. The psalm recalls the tears of the experience of captivity and the joy of being restored. It would be easy to misunderstand this in relation to our own context; it does not mean that we can expect God to restore the church of our youth: prosperous, powerful and once again at the centre of culture. So what would

restoration look like in our time and place? In relation to Isaiah 43, how could this be interpreted as the new thing the Lord will do?

### **The Epistle - Philippians 3.4b-14**

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:<sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;<sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

<sup>7</sup> Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup>More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. <sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

<sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup>Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

#### *For reflection:*

Paul never provides much detail about his conversion (most of what we know comes from Luke's Book of Acts). What Paul does offer are glimpses of the consequences of leaving behind all that once provided cause for pride and boasting in order that he might 'know Christ and the power of his resurrection'. Despite all that he has sacrificed (even though he counts this as loss), Paul recognizes that he has not yet reached his goal: the prize of God's heavenly call in Christ. How does Paul's sense of shedding unhelpful beliefs and traditions connect with our reflections about what is essential for the mission of our congregation?

## The Gospel - John 12.1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' <sup>6</sup>(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

### *For reflection:*

The behaviour of Mary and Martha in this passage demonstrates their devotion for Jesus. Martha serves the dinner and Mary anoints him. Despite the objection of Judas (who we are told is a thief), the expensive perfume had been purchased precisely for this moment – to anoint Jesus for his burial. This passage finishes in a way that leads some to think that Jesus is being dismissive of the poor, but this dinner actually concludes his public ministry; the next day, he enters Jerusalem to the crowd's shouts of 'Hosanna!' Chapters 13-17 detail Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples, before his arrest in chapter 18 and the events that follow. The day on which Jesus is anointed by Mary is, in effect, the day of his burial.

The devotion of Mary and Martha suggests that the mission of the church is to honour Jesus as the one 'in whom the fullness of God is pleased to dwell' (Colossians 1.19). What priorities does this suggest for our life together and the resources that this requires?

## Conclusion

Read the psalm for this Sunday again, this time responsively in the group

Take a moment of quiet reflection together after the psalm.

Have someone offer prayers which seem appropriate given the conversation you have had, and then conclude with the following traditional collect for the coming Sunday:

Almighty God,  
you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners:  
Grant your people grace to love what you command  
and desire what you promise;  
that, among the swift and varied changes of the world,  
our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen.

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