

LENT WEEK 4 DEVOTIONS (PREPARED ON 14 MARCH AND SHARED ON 20 MARCH 2021)

Guidelines in using these devotions:

1. *Take one devotion per day and use it as a spiritual resource for your personal reflection.*
2. *In your quiet time first read the given Bible passage and allow God to speak to you through it.*
3. *Read the passage again a second time and pick up words or phrases that attract you or catch your thoughts or imagination.*
4. *Try to find out how the words and phrases are relevant or speak to your situation or context.*
5. *Compare your thoughts with the reflection given below for that particular biblical passage.*
6. *Examine how this is relevant or useful to you during Lent 2021 and in your Christian life in general.*
7. *Conclude by offering your personal prayers to God and finally pray the collect given.*

Day 1: Read John 7.25-36

'I know him' (v.29)

Most modern languages use different words to describe forms of knowledge. There is an objective knowledge, knowing about someone or something, which is quite different from the intimate, subjective knowledge of someone through personal relationship. Jesus takes his opponents to task over their woefully shallow knowledge of God. They murmur and quibble over points of abstruse interpretation, whilst failing to recognize the embodiment of grace and truth that stands right before their eyes. Page after page, the evangelist attests to Jesus' intimate relationship with God. Though no one has seen God directly, Jesus is 'the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known' (John 1.18). All true knowledge is based on relationship. Jesus is secure in this personal knowledge of the Father. We may project all our fears and prejudices onto a distorted, idolatrous image of God. But genuine knowledge comes through humble seeking, and loving, and serving. This was the source of Jesus' radical freedom: and it can be ours as well. A great prayer by Saint Augustine addresses God as 'the light of the minds that know thee, the life of the souls that love thee, and the strength of the wills that serve thee'. Through Jesus, we too can pray St Augustine's words: 'Help us so to know thee that we may truly love thee, so to love thee that we may fully serve thee, whose service is perfect freedom.'

PRAYER

Almighty God, by the prayer and discipline of Lent may we enter into the mystery of Christ's sufferings, and by following in his Way come to share in his glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Day 2: Read John 7.37-52

'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me' (v.37)

The Festival of Booths (or Tabernacles) was a sort of Harvest Thanksgiving since it celebrated the gathering in of the crops and fruit. It went on a long time. Huts were built made of branches (the booths or tabernacles of the title), recalling the temporary dwellings of the Israelites in their 40 years in the wilderness. John doesn't explain any of this. Nor does he tell us about the custom of pouring water over the altar, a sign of God's promise that he would pour out his Spirit on his people. When Jesus speaks of quenching the thirst of the spiritually parched, he indicates that the promise at the heart of this great festival was being fulfilled in him, from whom would flow

‘rivers of living water’. Most readers of John’s Gospel down the centuries would not have known the connection between these words of Jesus and customs at the Feast of Booths. It isn’t necessary to know it. The reader of the Gospel only needs to recognize what it is to be spiritually dry and parched. Without that recognition, there is not much that Jesus can do for us. The human body cannot live long without water. Spiritual lifelessness is the consequence of not seeking the streams of living water Jesus promises us. This may be a particular danger for those of us well established in the faith who may neglect gradually the source of a healthy spiritual life.

PRAYER

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

Day 3: Read John 7.53 – 8.11

‘Neither do I condemn you’ (v.11)

This famous encounter between Jesus and the woman taken in adultery is not primarily about sexual infidelity. Any temptation to cast Jesus as a twenty-first-century liberal on sexual matters is a mistake. It’s his refusal to condemn this woman who has sinned against the law of Moses that is the focus of the story. A great crowd has gathered, keen to hear Jesus. We are probably in the outer Court of the Women in the Temple since that was where anyone could listen to religious teachers. Scribes and Pharisees arrive with the presumably distraught and dishevelled woman in tow. (There’s no mention of the man involved.) She is being used (and abused) to set a trap for Jesus. If he fails to condemn her to be stoned, he would be denying the Mosaic law. But if he does so, he would be usurping the Roman authorities’ exclusive right to impose a death penalty. Instead of debating the issue, Jesus simply invites anyone who is without sin to cast the first stone. The whole crowd gradually dissolves. No one has condemned her, and neither does Jesus. He has not come to condemn but to save the world (John 3.17). Even the briefest review of the tabloid press or social media shows that condemnation remains commonplace today. Condemnation is eternal death. The gospel is a protest against such ready condemnation. Are we able to rid ourselves of this deadly error?

PRAYER

Eternal God, give us insight to discern your will for us, to give up what harms us, and to seek the perfection we are promised in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Day 4: Read John 8.12-30

‘I am the light of the world’ (v.12)

At the Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles), four great lamps were lit in the temple, in the Court of the Women. The blaze on the Temple Mount could be seen for miles. In the Psalms, both the law (‘a lamp to my feet’ Psalm 119) and the Lord himself (‘my light and my salvation’ Psalm 27) were sources of illumination. The imagery was familiar and powerful. For Jesus to speak of himself as ‘the light of the world’ was thus the boldest of claims. He was claiming to be sent from the Father to lead the people of God out of darkness, and also to be the authentic

interpreter of the law and the prophets. From this point in John's Gospel, the enemies of Jesus become more vocal. What seems to us a gentle and attractive 'I am' saying of Jesus was, for his accusers, one of the most pernicious. Lights have been used in most forms of Christian worship down the centuries, particularly candles. The symbolism of candles has never lost its attraction even in the age of electricity. Perhaps it's because a candle is a living flame. A living flame needs oxygen, just like human beings. As it burns, a candle is gradually dying. The light of the world, drawing the same air as the people he comes to save, is on the way to his death.

PRAYER

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

Day 5: Read John 10.11-21

'... there will be one flock, one shepherd' (v.16)

This vision of the good shepherd drawing everyone into one flock comes after we have been told that the blind man to whom Jesus gave sight was driven out of his community (John 9.34). He was expelled because he would not condemn Jesus for giving him his sight on the sabbath. (Even a mighty work done on the sabbath contravened the law of Moses, so the scribes and Pharisees claimed.) Jesus draws a contrast between religious teachers concerned to keep the purity of their group, whatever the human casualties, and his own desire to draw in 'other sheep who do not belong to this fold'. He does not say who these other sheep are, but early readers of John's Gospel would have included many gentiles, who may have applied these words to themselves. It's likely, however, that the words of the prophet Ezekiel provide the context here. The prophet condemns the religious leaders of his day. God himself will have to come and be the people's shepherd. 'I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep ... I will seek the lost ... bring back the strayed ... bind up the injured strengthen the weak' (Ezekiel 34.15,16). The whole course of the ministry of Jesus has been shaped by these priorities. It has brought vehement opposition. The question John poses his readers is 'Whose side are you on?', though he is too subtle to put it quite so crudely.

PRAYER

Merciful Lord, absolve your people from their offences, that through your bountiful goodness we may all be delivered from the chains of those sins which by our frailty we have committed; grant this, heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake, our blessed Lord and Saviour, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen