

## LENT WEEK 5 DEVOTIONS (PREPARED ON 21 MARCH AND SHARED ON 28 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 speaks 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: Readings: Psalm 147, John 11.17-27.

*‘... if you had been here my brother would not have died’ (v.21)*

I once visited a priest whose wife had died two days previously. He told me he had already worked through the stages of bereavement and come to acceptance. It seemed unlikely in 48 hours. Then his wife’s sister arrived. He told her that if she had come earlier, his wife might not have died. I felt rather relieved that his grief was still so raw. The tears flowed. Martha’s grief is raw too. We know her and Mary from Luke’s Gospel where Mary is the one who sits listening to Jesus while Martha rushes around doing the household chores. Here we learn they have a brother Lazarus who has died. Mary sits at home mourning. Martha, by contrast, is out to greet Jesus. She blames him for not being there to prevent Lazarus’ death. But Martha still hopes Jesus can do something. She believes in the resurrection on the last day. That was common enough in Judaism at the time. Jesus tells her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life’. The light of the world is also life for all eternity. through him anyone can discover what it is to live abundantly. It’s with her bereavement still raw that Martha makes the fullest profession of faith found in John’s Gospel: ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.’ If she had suppressed her grief, would she have made this life-changing discovery?

***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 our Lord’s sake, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

### Day 2: Readings: Psalm 35, John 11.45-end.

*‘... and he remained there with the disciples’ (v.54)*

The chief priests and Pharisees are fearful of Jesus’ impact on the crowds and of potential political consequences. Caiaphas is frightened for his own status and position. Even Jesus, it seems, experiences fear; he’s lying low, refusing to emerge in public, not yet ready to face the end. Fear is a healthy human instinct. It acts as a warning against imminent dangers, ensuring we protect ourselves and others. We teach children to be wary of fire, careful chopping vegetables, mindful crossing the road – a gentle instilling of fear in the face of possible dangers. Talking with my teenage son recently about what he

might do if he were mugged, my advice was, ‘don’t be brave, give them your wallet and run’. In other words, be sensibly fearful and act accordingly. Yet sometimes we must rise above our fears with unwavering determination. In some parts of the world, Christians face physical danger and persecution, which many meet with extraordinary courage and bravery. In other parts of the world, fear emerges from the Church’s increasing marginalization. This is the fear of loss of influence, of irrelevance and eventual extinction. This kind of fear corrodes and creates the illusion that the future of the Church is dependent on us. In reality, the future is in God’s hands. Our calling, whatever our context, is to resist fear, be faithful in the knowledge of God’s constant presence, and to love without ceasing.

**Prayer:** *Gracious Father, you gave up your Son out of love for the world: lead us to ponder the mysteries of his passion, that we may know eternal peace through the shedding of our Saviour’s blood, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

### **Day 3: Readings: Psalm 124, John 12.1-11.**

***‘The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume’ (v.3)***

I imagine Mary’s actions in anointing Jesus’ feet to have been entirely spontaneous – an outpouring of great love – feelings of the heart overwhelming logic of the head. This shocking yet exquisitely beautiful offering is in direct contrast to Judas’ self-righteous anger, justified with perfectly reasonable arguments about how the money could have been spent on the poor. The story is a reminder that the realm of faith is never fully explainable by the intellect but demands a response, beyond mere reason, from the very core of our soul. But this story also confronts our sometimes comfortable complacency. It challenges us to take risks and to stand up for others. Mary took a monumental risk. What she did was not only wastefully extravagant but well beyond conventional behaviour for a woman. It would hardly have been surprising had Jesus himself chastised her. And yet she took a risk to show how much she loved him. Then, in a wonderful gesture of solidarity, Jesus stood up for Mary. ‘Leave her alone’, he said in response to Judas’ reprimand. Mary was accused unfairly, and Jesus, who could so easily have remained silent, came to her defence. When was the last time you took a risk for your faith, doing what was right instead of what was easiest? When was the last time you spoke up for someone else, when it would have been so much easier to bow your head in silence?

**Prayer:** *Most merciful God, who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ delivered and saved the world: grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross we may triumph in the power of his victory; 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 4: Readings: Psalm 126, John 12.20-36a.**

***‘... it is for this reason that I have come to this hour’ (v.27)***

Jesus associates his impending death with glory: ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified’ – an odd juxtaposition, underscoring the upside-down world of God’s economy where failure and suffering are redeemed. Christ’s moment of greatest suffering is to be his moment of greatest glory as

love and gentleness overcome hatred and violence. Approaching his death, Jesus doesn't speak of how to ensure his legacy continues. He talks instead of a seed dying before it bears fruit. This reminds me of the words of the early Christian author Tertullian: 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church' – death leading to new growth. Let's not romanticize the reality, but this often seems to be the experience of the persecuted Church – that through times of trial and suffering comes a deepening of faith, new insights into the meaning of the cross and hope for the future. There is much talk at present, in the West especially, of how to safeguard the future of a shrinking Church. It is right and proper that we take seriously our calling to proclaim the faith afresh in each generation and pass it on to the next. But in the process there is a danger that we might just miss something profound about fruit coming only once the seed has died. It is a painful truth to contemplate, but what might you in your context need to allow to die in order that something new might blossom?

**Prayer:** *Most merciful God, who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ delivered and saved the world: grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross we may triumph in the power of his victory; 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: Readings: Psalm 127, John 12.36b-end.**

***'... for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God' (v.43)***

John marks the end of Jesus' public ministry with the brief statement that 'he departed and hid from them'. The time for telling stories and parables, for teaching and performing miracles is over, and the people won't see Jesus again until after his arrest. In human terms, his efforts had failed. After all he'd said and done, the people did not believe in him. It must have hurt. There must have been a part of Jesus that had hoped the suffering wouldn't be needed. That through skill and effort and commitment he would manage to convince people of the need to repent and believe. If Jesus was, as we believe, fully human (as well as fully God), then his need for worldly affirmation will have been real and strong. Most of us are familiar with the feeling; we look for it again and again – to be noticed, successful, wealthy, influential. We may tell ourselves it's because we want to do good, and at our best there may be something of that. But in truth, this craving for human affirmation comes from a need to prove ourselves – to convince others, and ourselves, that we are worthwhile, valued and, ultimately, loved. Jesus' acceptance of his calling demonstrates that all we really need is to embrace our ultimate identity as beloved of God – those who are loved not because of what we achieve but simply because of who we are.

#### ***Prayer***

*Gracious Father, you gave up your Son out of love for the world: lead us to ponder the mysteries of his passion, that we may know eternal peace through the shedding of our Saviour's blood, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*