Meditations for Lent

The period from now until Easter is known as Lent. It is traditionally a time to consider our hearts as a preparation for the festival that follows.

First Friday in Lent

In the U.K., Lent fits into the transition between winter and Spring. The weather changes daily. Yesterday was gale and driving rain; today is gloriously and warmly bathed in sunshine. A few days ago we had a sharp frost. I took this photo of frost-encrusted bramble leaves before the rising sun melted the icing. Frost enhances the shape and pattern of each leaf, and adorns it with a delicate sculpture of tiny ice crystals. Beautiful... but bitterly cold.

Taking this shock of icy cold as a starter, imagine what the Twelve felt like as Jesus spoke boldly and confrontationally about the true cost of discipleship. As He spoke, I suspect that a frost chilled their souls... “What have we let ourselves in for?”

Reflect on the following Bible passage- Mark 8:34-38 (NLT)

Then, calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my message in these adulterous and sinful days, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”
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Immediately after this came the Transfiguration. After that, Good Friday looms. Then will come Resurrection.

Lent reminds us that before we get to the glory and celebration, first comes the frost that chills our souls. Only when we fully understand the cost can we fully enjoy Resurrection Life.

Take the time to feel the chill... and then embrace the hope.


Second Friday in Lent

Darkness shrouds the skies... the setting sun sends out its last bright rays of the day as it battles against the clouds moving in from the north. Night will fall and a storm will break soon.

As Lent moves gradually towards the Good Friday crisis, the New Testament records the words and actions of Jesus and also those of his followers and opponents.

The drama unfolds as the purpose of Jesus becomes clearer. Jesus is going to Jerusalem. Excitement and fear combine in the hearts of the Twelve. Betrayal grows from the seeds of discontent in the heart of Judas.

Darkness is growing.

Did Jesus have a sharper appreciation of every sunrise, sunset, and star as He knew his days grew shorter? How did He feel as the shadow of Death spread its wings over the world?

As we think about the utterly human dread that grapples with promised obedience of Jesus, how can we face the uncertainties and fears that sometimes grip our hearts as we try to live out what we believe? Other may not understand us, may mock our faith, or may challenge us outright.

Darkness seeks to extinguish the Light.

Will we hide the Light within us, or hold it high in defiance of the Night?
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Use today’s photograph and meditation to reflect on your understanding of the growing conflict caused by the life of Jesus. How will this impact your willingness to walk with Jesus towards the Cross? To follow the Light as it invades the Darkness?

Pray for Christians facing opposition and persecution. Pray for those who face difficulty and darkness in their lives. Pray for those, like Judas, who may be tempted to deny Christ or betray Him. Pray that our faith will be strengthened through the hope that comes from the Light that leads to life.

John 8:12 (NLT)
Jesus spoke to the people once more and said, “I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.”


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Third Friday in Lent

A perennial “weed” in my new garden is proving troublesome. Brambles are growing through the established shrubs- we even had a few decent blackberries in the autumn! The previous owner of the house had become too frail to keep up with the gardening. It doesn’t take long for brambles to grow and many other weeds to thrive.

Careful gardeners wear strong gloves. There will always be thorns, or splinters, or sharp stones... So it is the whole of life. For every flower, there is a weed; for every rose there will be thorns. I’d love to jump straight to the glorious Resurrection of Jesus- but there are a list of lessons to learn. Peter, John, James and Thomas all struggled with what Jesus began to teach on the road to Jerusalem. There will be stones in their shoes and thorns in their feet before they experience the deepest joy of meeting the Risen Christ.

Mark 8:31 (NLT)
Then Jesus began to tell them that the Son of Man must suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but three days later he would rise from the dead.

Lent gives us time and opportunity to consider the reality of being a Christian disciple. Most of us would welcome some assurance that our life is safe and secure. We may even start
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to believe that all trouble should pass us by- after all, did not Jesus promise to bless
us and keep us? Yes, on the Way of the Cross. Discipleship means sharing the
sufferings of Christ: they will come to those who faithfully witness to the Good News
of the Kingdom.

Challenge those wishful thoughts of an easy road, today, as a Lent
meditation. Jesus suffered literal thorns- the crown of mockery- in order to fulfil
His purpose of bringing in the Kingdom of God. He warned that we too would face
trouble and even persecution because we follow the Way of the Cross. He also
warned that we might suffer as a consequence of our own faults and sins. So... how
shall we respond?

Although we do not welcome the “thorns”- troubles and pain- can we, will we, accept
thorns as a fact of our reality instead of blaming God? Secondly: can we think of
some “gardening” we need to do in our souls to pull out the brambles and weeds that
are spoiling our walk with the HOLY Christ? Gardens that are well-tended have fewer
nasty surprises. Some troubles and suffering will come to us. If we allow dark corners
and overgrown tangles of self-centredness, pride, or impure thinking, that is where
the thorns will grow. We can, with care and Spirit-led humility, avoid the self-
inflicted scars that afflict the unwary.

Thank You for the honesty of Jesus who warned us of the cost of
discipleship. Lord, grant me patience and the spirit of humble
repentance. Amen.

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Fourth Friday
in Lent

The most wonderful thing about thorny rose bushes? They are gloriously
garlanded with roses. It’s more common
to say the rose bush has thorns- but as Lent progresses I’d like to change that
focus. Last Friday’s post stated “There will be thorns...” and looked at the way Jesus
embraced the trials on the Way of the Cross. Our own lives contain suffering
too- it’s not a strange or unexpected thing. We will see thorns as well as roses.

Roses are gorgeous. Most people like them. The colours, the perfume, the shapes: so
much variety of sheer beauty.

The life and character of Jesus, the divine become incarnate human, is as gloriously attractive as a rose. Most of the ordinary people loved Him, listened with open hearts, and found a window opening onto Heaven’s lovely landscape. The power-hungry, greedy, misguided and mistaken people of influence objected to this “new” King and Kingdom. Jesus did not fit their agendas nor their preconceived ideas. Jesus spoke of love and holiness within the ones who trusted and obeyed; this threatened the structures and ideas of the elite- and their traditions. Jesus spoke of bringing healing and forgiveness to the sick and sinful, as opposed to being a doctor for the self-diagnosed healthy! The rose, despite its beauty, had to go.

Like a rose, trampled on the ground...

I love the song that contains these words. It poetically pictures the tragedy of Good Friday and the Cross, and explains the Love that allowed this to happen. The One above all, the One who created all, is the One who loves all- even when the object of that Love rejects and despises the Beauty of ALL Beauty. The Rose is discarded, and trampled, and wasted- just like the petals thrown as confetti are walked over by the guests and then swept away as rubbish. For this Friday in Lent, consider this rose and the trampling of heavy boots. “These boots are made for walking... and one of these days these boots are gonna walk all over you...” This is the price of Love, and the reason for the Trial, the whips, the Crown of Thorns and the Cross. I know we want to skip over the sad part, and jump to Resurrection Morning- but we can’t. Not if we truly want to understand, honour, and worship Christ, the Rose of eternal beauty. Reflect on these song words, use them as a prayer. Make sure you understand that Christ thought of YOU, and of ME.

Jesus took the Fall for the Fallen. He offered beauty for ashes. God entered fully the incarnate nature of humanity, made for glory yet beset by shame, and in ways theologians have struggled to express, God brought salvation to the world fallen from grace. That grace embraced the trampling and asks that we embrace Jesus, the One trampled in our place. Is that too much to ask?

Above all powers, above all kings
Above all nature
and all created things
Above all wisdom
and all the ways of man
You were here
before the world began

Crucified
Laid behind the stone
You lived to die
Rejected and alone

Like a rose trampled on the ground
You took the fall
And thought of me, above all.
Meditations for Lent

Now to finish today’s thought: focus on the shortest Bible verse, describing Jesus at the grieving for Lazarus: John 11:35 “Jesus wept.”

Sometimes grief is good.

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Fifth Friday in Lent

The vultures gather...

The vultures gather. Vultures in Britain are captive and tame (well, conditioned to human interaction). Somehow they seem graceless, clumsy on the ground, and rather threatening. In the wild, they are often the first sign of creatures in trouble-dead or dying- as they wheel lazily in the air, gathering as a crowd ready to pounce with talon and razor-beak. Few of us find vultures attractive- although this captive one on display showed a certain perky interest in visitors. I think he was hungry... but he makes a dynamic image.
When vultures gather for a kill, they wait patiently... then one will approach cautiously and peck at the victim. If it shows life, the vultures will wait a bit longer. The weaker the victim and the nearer death, the more vultures will attend. Other predators and scavengers will notice the vultures circling, and come closer to seize their share of prey.

**Luke 22:1-6 (NLT)**

*The Festival of Unleavened Bread, which is also called Passover, was approaching. The leading priests and teachers of religious law were plotting how to kill Jesus, but they were afraid of the people’s reaction. Then Satan entered into Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve disciples, and he went to the leading priests and captains of the Temple guard to discuss the best way to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted, and they promised to give him money. So Judas agreed and began looking for an opportunity to betray Jesus so they could arrest him when the crowds weren’t around.*

Jerusalem was buzzing. The great Festival was getting close, and pilgrims came up to the Holy City of David, Jerusalem, to be part of the ceremonies and celebrations. The priests were on hand at the Temple for sacrifices and worship. Roman troops hovered outside the city, aware of the volatile atmosphere, and wary of the impact a “Messiah” would have on public order and raising taxation for the Empire.

The vultures gather- and Jesus enters the killing zone. In the eyes of the Establishment, Jesus was dangerous, possibly blasphemous, and disrupted their social and religious balance (and power). Threats are met by force. The Prince of Peace is deemed a threat.

Vultures plot- but are nervous, scared of the possible outcomes. The common people are excited by Jesus and the Messianic Hope. So the authorities back off... until the Accuser, Satan, “enters” Judas Iscariot and the seeds of betrayal sprout. We could speculate endlessly about the motives of Judas. Some say a thief, others a political extremist, yet others say he tried to precipitate the crisis to force Jesus to challenge Roman authority and the legalism of the Jewish leaders. Who knows the heart of the Betrayer?

A price is set. The vultures hide in the shadows. Judas plots and schemes. Jesus moves head-on into confrontation. There will be a corpse on a Cross.

This didn’t all happen at once. The events of Holy Week were the climax of a developing confrontation. Love spoke Truth. Hatred inspired lies and manipulation. There was a horrible inevitability about the outcome. Yet God had a purpose through it all. Christ had become human so humanity could be reconciled and Salvation given as our Gift.
Meditations for Lent

In this part of the Easter narrative, plots are agreed in the dark corners while the Light of the World, The Lamb of God, comes to Jerusalem for the Passover. Vultures want to tear and rend the Innocent: Satan tries to destroy the Rule and authority of God.

The storm is gathering. Will the Darkness overcome the Light?

Meditate on the verses from Luke 22, and try to imagine yourself in the pressure cooker that is Jerusalem. How will you respond? Can Jesus be kept safe? Is your own life at risk?

Think for a while about our own age: volatile politics, personality and celebrity cults, violent terrorists and extremists seeking to harm our way of life. Our economy is based on injustice and unfair distribution of wealth. Both the poor and the powerful seek their own will and profit- and come to blows. Prophetic and counter-cultural voices from the Christian Church are unpopular and unwelcome. Watch what is happening in the dark corners... where the vultures are circling... and PRAY.

May Your Kingdom come... may Your Will be done... May Light shine on in dark days. Amen.


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Passover was a bad time for lambs. Our experience of lambs is probably limited to the sight of tiny woolly gymnasts bouncing and bleating on the farms. The distance from the field to the Sunday roast is a journey we don’t think on too much. Unlike the farmers, we can be idealistic about enjoying the cute antics and adorable faces. They aren’t pets, though - and lambs live and die on purpose.

Smoke on the skyline of Jerusalem would have been almost permanent during the Festival. Everyone and their sheep came to the city for the priests to make sacrifice in the holy Temple of Almighty God.

It is nearly time. John the Baptist proclaimed Jesus at the beginning of Christ’s ministry. He does not call Jesus a hero, a ruler, or a prophet. Jesus is the Lamb, the One who will take away the sin of the world. Lambs live to die. Jesus will be THE great Passover Lamb, the final, complete, and perfect sacrifice Who fulfils the Law and the Prophets by sharing in the mystery of Death. But Death will not hold Him. We too were originally created to be eternal- and Jesus will be Victor over sin and death, and the Risen Champion who will unseat Satan from his stolen throne.

To fully understand the Atonement may be beyond our ability until all is revealed in our face-to-face with Jesus. Holy Awesome God of Trinity, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, the One who Created and Sustains, is also Saviour, Redeemer, and is our True Lord.
Today is a time to remember the fire, the smoke, and the blood of Passover. Jesus remembered that with his closest friends: they held the Passover Feast, and Jesus began to suffer as the traitor crept into the shadows of betrayal. The last meal of Jesus... bread and wine to celebrate the death of the Lamb. Until He returns. Your sins, my sins, all the sordid sin of history consigned to the Altar. For see, THIS is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Think on that- with tears and joy.


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Maundy Thursday- the night of preparation and sorrow.

Maundy Thursday marks many sad moments. As Jesus and the Twelve share the Passover meal, Judas turns away. He has already agreed to betray Jesus. Now he leaves the gathering- as John 13:30 records poignantly– “and it was night.”

Judas went into literal darkness and into spiritual desolation. It was night.

For Jesus too- after the meal they go out to the Garden of Gethsemane. In the darkness of night, the Light of the World tends to the dread of what is to come. Jesus goes into the night... and we should not minimise the pain and sorrow in his heart. His humanity must not be undervalued.

The terror and horror of the Cross stands in front of Him. The first nail was betrayal by Judas. Now Jesus wrestles in prayer, preparing Himself. The Eleven cannot stay awake- not even Peter, James & John– Jesus is alone.
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The submission to His heavenly Father’s Will is costly—sweat “like drops of blood” is a testimony to the suffering.

Armed guards arrive to arrest Jesus, and He is taken for trial by both Jewish and Roman authorities. The night seemed endless—but before the dawn, there is one more sharp nail to be driven home.

Peter, who had boasted he would NEVER deny Jesus, is brave enough to go to the palace courtyard—but not brave enough to hold firm when challenged. Three times Peter is asked to identify with Jesus—and he denies Him. “I do not know the man.”

The flickering light of the fire illuminates the distraught face of Peter as he hears the rooster crow. The day of desperation dawns.

Peter went out into the darkness in tears.

This night is an opportunity to reflect on our own promises to Christ; to repent from our sins; and to remember the love of Jesus who faced whip, thorns, and nails for the sake of the world.

Reflect. Repent. Remember.


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Good Friday

It was early Friday morning...

It was early Friday morning when they led us from the cell, and I saw they had a carpenter to crucify as well.
It was early Friday morning, as the sun just touched the sky, I thought, a little bitterly, "What a lovely day to die."

They led us out to Golgotha through the crowded twisting streets the crowd were cursing, laughing now, what a lovely Friday treat. The hammers' smack, a scream of pain, the thud of nails on flesh; And not content with killing him, they cursed his bloodstained head.

It’s my turn now, my life is done, and it’s justice that I die. But the carpenter is innocent- tell me, why should He die? I think my time is running out, the sky has gone quite black- The crowd have all gone silent now- God must have turned his back.

Perhaps the crowd will change their mind and let this good man go. He speaks to me of love and peace, and now I think I know just exactly who this stranger is, hanging on the hill; For on this lovely sunny day, it’s the Son of God they kill.

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Eyewitnesses are always in demand. We want to know what happened, and when, where, and why. People who were present at the event find a ready audience.

On Good Friday there were many witnesses. The crowds, the soldiers, the authorities... and the mother of the Man named Jesus. There are good reasons to believe that some of the material recorded in Luke’s Gospel came from the memories of Mary, just as Mark’s account is based closely on the preaching of Peter.
Meditations for Lent

I’d like to focus on one of the least reputable witnesses. Luke 23 v32-43 tells us of two criminals executed with Jesus. One mocked Him, the other pleaded for mercy. “Remember me when you come into your Kingdom....”

The words on the photo are from a song I wrote from the perspective of this condemned rogue- who found Light even in the Darkness of his execution. There is hope, even on Good Friday.

Resurrection Day- Easter Sunday

Love Wins!

Resurrection Sunday- a day for everlasting joy.

Every Good Friday ends in tears. Easter Saturday is a remembrance of hopeless sorrow and grief. Then begins Resurrection Day! Christ was sealed in a solid rock tomb, with soldiers to guard the grave. The disciples had scattered to hide. The authorities slept uneasily. “What if the disciples stole the body... What if Jesus came back to life? Surely a problem dies when it is buried...”

Early in the morning, the women set out to give their final gift of love, a fitting final farewell to Jesus. But the great Stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty. Their shock, loss, and horror are suddenly transformed as angelic messengers told them the gloriously, gleefully, gigantically good news. Love wins.
After the winter’s frost comes the stirring of life. Like the beautifully wrapped beech buds in the photo, the grave clothes have been opened and left behind as mute witness. This Body needs no shroud. Jesus has been vindicated, the Atonement is complete, and the stolen reign of Satan is over. Jesus is Risen! Life is its own witness. Love wins.

During that day, right up to the evening, the disciples see life as the Resurrected Christ appears. Doubters and dreamers discover that Love wins. Like a mighty rushing wind, the rumour of Resurrection begins to travel throughout Jerusalem and even to Rome and the ends of the Earth. The next great Wind will be the Pentecostal power of Holy Spirit life. Love wins!

Choose Life- not Death. Choose God- not Judgment. Choose Love- just as Jesus did. LOVE WINS.


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