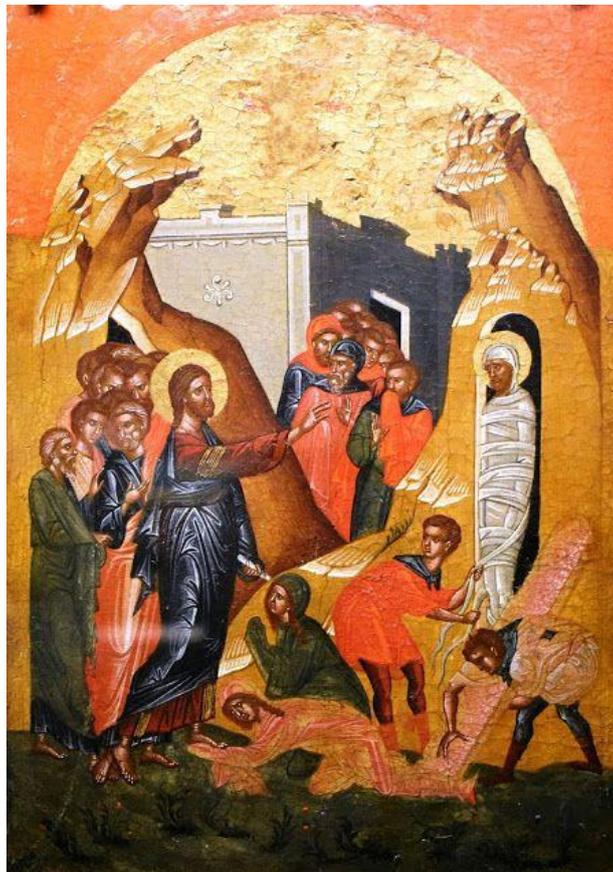




## **Lent Transforming Life**

***Exploring Personal stories of Faith and Hope  
through the Bible***



*The raising of Lazarus - Death and life transformed*

## INTRODUCTION

Why bother keeping Lent at all?

Lent, the 40 days leading to Easter, is traditionally a period when Christians are invited to take time to strengthen and deepen our relationship with God, through a blend of prayer, simple living, and study. John Chrysostom, an early church father writing in the third century after the resurrection, a large figure in our faith's development in my view, said "No act of virtue can be great if it is not followed by advantage for others. So, no matter how much time you spend fasting, no matter how much you sleep on a hard floor and eat ashes and sigh continually, if you do no good to others, you do nothing great." There's our challenge - this year of all year as we are compelled to stay indoors, look after ourselves and keep safe.

For some people, Lent is all about giving up something or reading the Vicar's recommended book and doing nothing with it. My preference is to get on and do something - like donating to the Foodbank or even litter collecting in our locality. You might have lost a bit of weight, you might have learnt something, but what about your spiritual diet, your faith dimension, your Love of Christ? How has that been formed or transformed? For some, why bother with Lent at all – after all, we are journeying through a pandemic - our life has been changed, we have lost so many people? When will normal return?

Maybe you haven't engaged with a Lent course before, maybe you think it's not for you. Perhaps this one will transform you as it's all going to be about people.

The way we keep Lent should make a difference. – this year, observing Lent is the key building our relationship with God. It follows, then, that a good starting point would be to ask God to help you discern how best to use this time in which your relationship with God is your priority. Maybe it's learning from others as they transformed themselves through Christ. We see this throughout the pages of Scripture, the old making way for the new, so how does it happen? The Bible has so many people to learn from Our Lent Course is only scratching the surface as we consider six people as we see how they were transformed.

As we go through these weeks of Lent, we'll look at six very different people in the Bible. Some have excellent character traits, while others are sadly lacking. Hopefully, we can learn from their examples. What are some of the qualities needed to live as people of God? Easter is the ultimate transformation: A dying man on a bloodied cross; and three days later, an empty tomb – the man propelled into newness of life.

Our Lent course starts with a devotional time of prayer from our Praying in Lent resource. We will then have a reflection and a time for a short discussion to air learning points or we can be still and reflect. Our evening will end with Compline as we end our day together. The course will be followed online (or via the telephone conference facility) on Zoom. The resources are going to be available on screen or in hard copy. The course will run each Thursday throughout Lent, starting at 7.45pm - 9pm (if you stay on for Compline),

This year, our reflections and questions for discussion have been posed by Sarah Tummey. As well as being one of Margaret and Alan Tummey's daughters, she wrote the Advent Study we used - Christmas - God's Promise Kept. It went down well and it's a privilege to work with her on this course.

Lent is both private – for it focuses on the spring-cleaning of your soul – and corporate, for, as the Ash Wednesday liturgy reminds us, it is the season when together we learn to be God's people once again. May I commend to you a Lenten approach this year that makes space for both dimensions? Sarah and I (or any of the parishes' Lay Ministers) can help and support you through this holy season, please do speak to one of us if you need some further guidance.



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**WEEK 1**  
**18<sup>th</sup> February**  
**Dependence**  
**1 Samuel 8-13**

In 1 Samuel, we see God's people asking for a king to rule over them, and God's response is not a favourable one. "The Lord told Samuel, 'Do what the people tell you. They have not rejected you. They have rejected Me. They don't want Me to be their king. They are doing the same thing they have always done. I took them out of Egypt, but they left Me and served other gods. They are doing the same to you. So, listen to the people and do what they say. But give them a warning. Tell the people what a king will do to them'" (1 Samuel 8:7-9). God saw the people's lack of dependence on Him, and granted their request nonetheless.

Saul was the son of an important figure from the tribe of Benjamin, taller and better-looking than all the other men in Israel. Samuel prepared him to be Israel's first king and gave him very specific instructions. Two men would meet him, and later, three other men with offerings normally reserved for priests. When he accepted their offerings, God's Spirit would settle on him and he would be transformed – like a different person. Then he was to make his way to Gilgal and wait for Samuel to tell him what to do (1 Samuel 10:2-8).

To begin with, Saul followed these instructions to the letter and as he did so, God's Spirit empowered him and gave him success, but it was short-lived. When Samuel said he would meet Saul at Gilgal, Saul waited a week for him, but Samuel didn't show up. Saul's soldiers began to desert him, but instead of continuing to wait, he took matters into his own hands. Listen for the accusatory tone of his voice, and the number of times he uses the word 'I'. "I saw the soldiers leaving me. You were not here on time, and the Philistines were gathering at Micmash. I thought to myself, 'The Philistines will come here and attack me at Gilgal, and I haven't asked the Lord to help us yet.' So, I forced myself to offer the burnt offering" (1 Samuel 13:11-12). Samuel is nonplussed and confronts Saul's foolishness. If he had done what God said, his family could have ruled Israel forever. God was seeking out someone who would obey Him. He found that man and chose him to be the new leader of His people. His name was David.

## Reflection

In 1 Samuel 12:12, Samuel addresses the people he's led all his life. He was an exemplary leader, yet when they saw the king of the Ammonites, they too asked for a king.

- \* Who or what do you trust for your security?
- \* What about your friends and neighbours? What do you observe about them?
- \* How can you help one another?

“Let me hear of Your unfailing love each morning, for I am trusting You. Show me where to walk, for I give myself to You” (Psalm 143:8, NLT)

Saul made his first mistake when he panicked and became self-focused.

\* Are there advantages to being self-reliant? “But remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth” (Deuteronomy 8:18, NIV)

\* What might stop someone asking for help?

\* Do you see the church as somewhere to go for advice and support?

\* Why or why not?

## Suggested Song

“As the Deer” (Robin Mark)

[As the deer pants for the water - Robin Mark - YouTube](#)



**WEEK 2**  
**25<sup>th</sup> February**  
**Zeal**

**Song of Solomon 1-8**

Song of Solomon is a beautiful book. Although it's about King David's son Solomon's attachment to a peasant-woman, it also points to the relationship between Jesus and His church. John the Baptist once described Jesus as the Bridegroom and the church is known as His bride, so as you read about the lover and his beloved, try to imagine Jesus speaking the lover's words to you. "Let me see you, let me hear your voice. Your voice is so pleasant, and you are so beautiful" (Song of Solomon 2:14).

Dee Brestin has enlightened me with her book "He Calls you Beautiful". She sees Song of Solomon as a romance in three stages: Chapters 1-2, first love; 3:1-5:9, wilderness love (when the bridegroom hides his face); 5:10-8:14, invincible love.

It's chapter 5 I want to concentrate on. The bride is restless – sleeping fitfully, but her heart is awake. Her lover comes to the door, but she's taken off her dressing-gown. She doesn't want to get out of bed and shrug herself back into it, and the dirt floor will smear her bare feet, so she hesitates. When she finally answers the door, he's given up waiting! Realising suddenly what she's missed, she hurries out to look for him, but it's not an easy ride. The guards seize her; they strike her; seeing her dishevelled appearance, they find her a disgrace.

As the misery continues, her friends ask what's so special about this man of hers. Now she's had time to reflect; now she knows what he means to her. "He is desirable in every way. Such, O women of Jerusalem, is my lover, my friend" (Song of Solomon 5:16, NLT). She's not afraid to show her devotion. "I am my lover's, and he claims me as his own" (Song of Solomon 7:10, NLT). This time, nothing can separate them.

## Reflection

When the bride hesitates, she has a difficult time getting things back to the way they should be.

- \* How might she have prevented this trial?
- \* In what ways can you show appreciation to your loved ones?

"Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord" (Romans 12:11, NIV)

Think of yourself as the bride and Jesus as her Lover at the door.

- \* What does His presence mean to you?
- \* Are you willing to go all-out for Him?
- \* How might you follow Him wholeheartedly?

## Suggested Song

"What a Friend I've Found" (Delirious?) [What a Friend I've Found - YouTube](#)

**WEEK 3**  
**4<sup>th</sup> March**  
**Compassion**  
**Jonah 1-4**

The first part of Jonah's story is well-known. God asks Jonah to go to Nineveh; he sails off in the opposite direction; a storm brews; they throw him overboard; he's swallowed by a huge fish. (Some say a whale, but you'd need something bigger than a whale to swallow a human being.) In the belly of the fish, Jonah prays a desperate prayer. "I will give sacrifices to You, and I will praise and thank You. I will make special promises to You, and I will do what I promise" (Jonah 2:9).

When God spoke to the fish and it hurled Jonah onto dry land, he knew what he had to do. He went to Nineveh and preached God's message to its people; they expressed sorrow for their sin; God showed mercy to them ... and Jonah lived happily ever-after?

No, he didn't.

Surprisingly, Jonah was furious. "I knew that You are kind, and if these people stopped sinning, You would change Your plans to destroy them" (Jonah 4:2). He may have followed orders, but he had no compassion for his hearers, so God intervened. As Jonah sheltered, God caused a plant to grow above his head, shading him from the sun and making him feel more relaxed, but the next day, it died. The midday sun beat down on Jonah and his rage returned. "It is right for me to be angry! I am angry enough to die" (Jonah 4:9). God reasoned that Jonah did nothing for the plant, yet he felt compassion for it, so shouldn't God also pity a great city full of people living in ignorance? We don't know how Jonah responded, but it's my hope that he was humbled and let God soften his heart.

## Reflection

It was hard for Jonah to put aside his own prejudice and go to Nineveh.

- \* Is there something specific God wants you to do?
- \* Has it ever seemed too much for you?
- \* How have you overcome that?

"By His divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life" (2 Peter 1:3, NLT)

Jonah sulked when his comfort was taken away.

- \* Is there something you're angry about?
- \* Have you asked God for His perspective?

## Suggested Song

"Everyone Needs Compassion" (Keswick) [Everyone Needs Compassion \[Live\] - YouTube](#)

**WEEK 4**  
**11<sup>th</sup> March**  
**Faith**  
**Philemon**

The book of Philemon has only one chapter, and in it we find Onesimus – a slave belonging to Philemon, whose name means ‘Useful’. Onesimus is in a tricky spot because he’s run away from his master, which was punishable by death. Philemon didn’t appear to be a cruel master. When writing about the situation, Paul addressed the letter to him and two others (possibly his wife and son), and the church who met in their home. This points to a generous follower of Jesus, using his resources to host others and further God’s message. On the subject of Onesimus, Paul plays on the meaning of his name, acknowledging he hasn’t been much use to Philemon in the past. Perhaps this workshy slave simply wanted to be free of his responsibilities.

He may have escaped Philemon, but somehow in the course of his travels, God brought him to Paul. Paul writes that Philemon owes him for his own life (verse 19), so it’s possible Onesimus worked in Philemon’s household when Philemon heard Paul’s preaching and believed in the Lord. Therefore, they would have already been acquainted. Did Onesimus shake with fear when he saw Paul, knowing he could inform Philemon of his whereabouts? Paul says of Onesimus: “He became my son while I was in prison” (verse 10). Did they meet in jail? However it happened, Onesimus also heard Paul’s preaching and put his faith in Jesus, which changed everything.

Onesimus now had to face his mistakes, but he could do so with hope. Perhaps they were separated so Philemon could have him back not as a slave, but as a dear brother (verse 16). He returns with Paul’s letter, asking Philemon to welcome him as he would his friend Paul. As with Jonah last week, we don’t know the outcome, but there wouldn’t have been any possibility of such an outcome without their shared faith.

## **Reflection**

Following Jesus impacts every area of life.

- \* Has your faith caused you to approach something differently? What was it?
- \* How did believing in Jesus alter your response?

“Now, in Christ, it doesn’t matter if you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or free, male or female. You are all the same in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28)

God’s message isn’t exclusive to one people group, but Jesus died for the whole world.

- \* Have you travelled to another country?
- \* Did you meet with other Christians while you were there?
- \* How can we help our fellow-believers around the world?

## **Suggested Song**

“Friends in High Places” (Hillsong Worship) [Friends in High Places Lyrics - YouTube](#)

**WEEK 5**  
**18<sup>th</sup> March**  
**Obedience**

Luke 10:38-42; John 11

When we first meet Martha, she's flustered. Luke says it was Martha who let Jesus and His friends stay in her home (Luke 10:38), so she's good at hospitality, but guests always involve work. We don't know what she was doing (preparing the meal? Making up the beds?), but we do know her sister was listening to Jesus. "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" (Luke 10:40), but Jesus can see she's distracted. He tells her Mary made the right choice. Did Martha argue with Him? It's not recorded. I like to think she sat with Him for a while, and later He helped her with all the preparations.

Certainly, they remained in contact. We see Martha again in John 11. She and Mary sent a message to Jesus when their brother was gravely ill, but by the time He arrives, Lazarus is already dead. Martha's the one who goes out to meet Jesus, saying: "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you anything you ask" (John 11:21-22). She's holding onto hope, even in her suffering.

Martha already believes in a resurrection at the end of time, but Jesus challenges her further. "I am the resurrection. I am life. Everyone who believes in Me will have life, even if they die. And everyone who lives and believes in Me will never really die. Martha, do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26). She confesses her faith in Jesus – that He's the Messiah, the Son of God, but He doesn't turn things around immediately. He takes time to weep with them, showing His love for Lazarus.

Then, coming to the graveside, he asks them to move the stone, but Martha points out it's been four days since Lazarus died. There will be a bad smell, so Jesus says: "Didn't I tell you that you would see God's glory if you believe?" (John 11:40, NLT). There's no argument. Martha puts her faith in Him and sees her brother raised from death.

## Reflection

Through a series of challenges, Jesus changed Martha's worldview.

- \* What brought you to faith? Can you remember the chain of events?
- \* Has someone challenged you about your beliefs?
- \* What was the result?

"All things are possible for the one who believes" (Mark 9:23)

Martha and Mary's friendship with Jesus caused many to witness a miracle.

- \* Are you comfortable talking about your faith in Jesus?
- \* How do you think it might affect others if you did?

## Suggested Song

"Knowing You Jesus" (Graham Kendrick) [Knowing You, Jesus - Graham Kendrick \(Lyrics\) - YouTube](#)

**WEEK 6**  
**25<sup>th</sup> March**  
**Surrender**

Luke 1:26-38; Mark 3:20-35; John 19:25-27; Acts 1:7-14

Mary is often spoken of at Christmas, when we think of the angel Gabriel announcing her imminent pregnancy. She digests the angel's words, and her response is one I admire. A betrothal was more serious than our modern-day engagement. To cancel would necessitate a divorce ceremony. In other words, people saw the couple as husband and wife, so if a woman was found to be pregnant by another man, it was equivalent to committing adultery and carried the same punishment in Jewish law: Death by stoning. Mary must have understood this. She must have realised Jesus' paternity would be questioned in the future, but still she says: "I am the Lord's servant. Let this thing you have said happen to me" (Luke 1:38). This is just the start of her submission. So much more will be required of her throughout Jesus' earthly life.

On one occasion, Jesus and His followers hardly found time to eat. When Jesus' family heard of it, they went to apprehend Him. They thought He'd lost the plot, but Jesus wasn't swayed by their opinion and didn't want to get into an argument. "A kingdom that fights against itself will not survive. And a family that is divided will not survive" (Mark 3:24-25). Later, when His mother and brothers are mentioned, Jesus says: "Anyone who does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35, NLT). If Mary overheard this, it must have stung a great deal, but she had to let go of her preconceived ideas because God had a higher claim on His Son.

Preconceptions weren't the only things Mary had to release into God's hands. In the end, she had to lose her firstborn. I've never suffered the loss of a child, but I know for many, that kind of pain can last a lifetime. As Mary stands near the cross, Jesus looks at her, and at John – His close friend and follower. "Your son," He says to Mary. "Your mother," He tells John. Mary must let go, but Jesus doesn't abandon her; He makes sure she's provided for. John takes her in and cares for her.

I'm inspired by what happens next. Jesus is raised from the dead and after forty days, He gives one last instruction before He's taken up to heaven: "Remember that I will send you the One my Father promised. Stay in the city until you are given that power from heaven" (Luke 24:49), so His followers journey the half-mile to Jerusalem. They go to the upper room where they're staying and start to pray together, and who's there with them? Mary His mother, and His brothers (Acts 1:14). They might have once thought Jesus was out of His mind, but now they believe, and they're in the upper room when God's Holy Spirit comes to empower the early church.

## Reflection

Mary had to lay a lot down, but the result was great blessing.

- \* Have you had to put anything aside in your life?
- \* How did that make you feel?
- \* Have you seen any fruit from it?

“If you wanted to build a building, you would first sit down and decide how much it would cost” (Luke 14:28)

Mary’s marriage and reputation were on the line when she learned of her pregnancy.

- \* What might it cost you to follow Jesus?
- \* Are you willing to pay the price?

## Suggested Song

“I Surrender All” (Lauren Talley) [I Surrender All - By: Lauren Talley - YouTube](#)

