



# ***Wilderness Journey***

## **STUDIES FOR LENT**

### **2019**



# LENT

In Christian tradition, the season of Lent, along with Advent, was one of the great seasons of preparation for candidates who were to be baptised on Christmas Day or Easter Sunday.

Today, while baptism is no longer performed only on these two days, Lent remains a powerful journey of penitence, spiritual discipline (focussed around the three practices of fasting, prayer and giving of time, talents and treasures) and preparation for the experience of Holy Week.

My prayer is that you will find this series of studies to be a resource that takes your Lenten journey deeper, that enables you to hear afresh the call to follow Jesus, and that equips you to serve him more fully in your own life and through the ministries of the Queanbeyan Uniting Church

Rev. Dr John Squires  
Intentional Interim Minister  
Queanbeyan Uniting Church

# **Lent 1   *Wilderness Journey***

## **Study One**

Spend the first part of the group meeting with introductions and the second part of the meeting discussing the readings as indicated.

It would be a good thing to begin with a brief prayer, and to end with a time when the group can pray, perhaps especially identifying issues or matters that have been raised in the discussion during the study.

There is a prayer at the end which you may wish to use, to bring this time of prayer to a conclusion.

## **1.1 Introductions**

Invite each group member to share their name, and then to share, as they feel comfortable, about these questions:

- *how long have you belonged to QUC?*
- *where were you worshipping in 1988?*
- *what one thing about QUC stands out for you?*  
(this could be something positive, something challenging, something disturbing, something inspiring ...)
- *what one thing do you most hope for in your walk of faith?*  
(this may be as an individual, or as a part of QUC).

Make sure that each person is comfortable with sharing and has time to share. The introductions are not for discussion, but as a way for people to establish themselves with each other.

It is important to emphasise that when one person is talking, the other group members are invited to listen, carefully, and reflect, quietly, on what they hear – and not to debate what they hear!

## ***1.2 Reflecting on the Readings***

Read through the lectionary readings for the first Sunday in Lent (***Luke 4:1-13*** and ***Romans 10:8-13***). Before the study group meets, do some thinking and praying about the issues that are of most interest or concern to you.

***Luke 4***      1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 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. 3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." 4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 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. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." 8 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

9 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, 10 for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' 11 and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

12 Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

**Romans 10** 8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9 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. 10 For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. 11 The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." 12 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. 13 For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Each week, we will seek to link the readings with our situation as a congregation, and with the hopes and plans that we might have for our future as a congregation.

Some questions for your consideration are:

1) *Consider Jesus' experience in the wilderness.*

*How did this help him prepare for his ministry?*

2) *Why do you think a 'wilderness' experience was good or necessary preparation?*

3) *How might have this experience helped Jesus to better understand his calling?*

4) *Do you know in what direction our church is going?  
How does this correlate with Paul's words to the Romans?*

5) *Will you be closer to realising your vision and hopes  
for our church in 3-5 years time?*

6) *If nothing changes in your church, will your church look  
any different in the future from what it looks like now?*



## **1.3 Further questions**

Some additional questions that might help you to think about the journey ahead:

- a) *What brought you to this congregation?  
What keeps you here?*
- b) *What are some of the things you value in our congregation?*
- c) *If you could change one thing about your congregation,  
what would it be?*
- d) *What are my greatest concerns  
when I think of my congregation?*
- e) *What are your dreams for our future as a church for today,  
and how might we achieve them?*
- f) *What mission might God be calling us to as a congregation?*

## 1.4 Closing Prayer

God, you are always  
calling your people  
to follow you into the future,  
inviting them to new ventures,  
new challenges,  
new ways to care,  
new ways to touch the hearts of all.

When they become fearful of the unknown,  
give them courage.

When they worry that they are not up to the task,  
remind them that you would not call them  
if you did not believe in them.

When they get tired, or feel disappointed  
with the way things are going,  
remind them that you can bring change  
and hope out of the most difficult situations.

*Neil Paynter*

## **Lent 2 *Wilderness Journey***

### **Study Two**

Our Gospel reading this week is ***Luke 13:31-35***. There are a number of interesting contrasts in this reading, which hopefully will be helpful as we explore our church journey alongside the readings through Lent.

<sup>31</sup>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 outside of 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.’”

## **2.1 Diversity and debate**

Christians have frequently been taught to think of Pharisees as hypocrites and enemies of Jesus. But here we have Pharisees who come to warn Jesus to flee from Galilee because Herod wants to kill him.

While Jesus and the Pharisees did not see things eye to eye, we find in Luke and Acts that Pharisees are often in the company of Jesus and not always antagonistic. Jesus is often invited to the home of a Pharisee for dinner (Luke 7:36, 11:37; 14:1).

In Acts 5:33-39, when the Jewish Sanhedrin wanted to kill the apostles, a well-known Pharisee, Gamaliel, counsels care in the treatment of the disciples. Some Pharisees had even become Christians (Acts 15:5).

The presence of the Pharisees raises the value of diversity and debate in a healthy congregation. The Pharisees highly valued diversity and debate. The Jewish Talmud is a long record of debates, of Pharisaic teachers

disagreeing with one another, coming together to share their best arguments before the assembly, of voting on a decision, and then recording the minority opinion along with the majority.

We should not be surprised that Luke shows some Pharisees as hypocrites, some as avaricious, and some as wanting to help Jesus, because in every religious group there are people who fail to live up to the ideal. The Pharisees were a diverse movement of people with a shared commitment to seek and serve God in their daily life, and who took scripture and its interpretation very seriously. But they did hold different points of view from another in serious matters of faith.

## ***For discussion***

Throughout history, God has called together disparate peoples with different gifts, and strengths and weaknesses, and formed them into what we call the church.

*Does our church still reflect this diversity, and how is this shown?*

*Do we still immerse ourselves in scripture, debating its significance with one another in a way that will help us move forward in our faith?*

*Can we disagree with one another yet still feel called to a common destiny, to do justice and mercy and worship God?*

## **2.2 The fox and the hen**

Herod is represented by Jesus as a fox, and Jesus goes on to describe himself as a mother hen with chicks. The image of a fox represents that which would destroy, and the worldly values of power and materialism. The hen, on the other hand, represents the embodiment of God's love and distress for the people.

Jesus deliberately does not represent himself in the more traditional scriptural images of a lion, or an eagle, in this story. He is the mother hen. Jesus is not the fox who destroys wantonly. Jesus is the mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no real weapons. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. She is prepared to die to save her chicks.

This symbolism embodies the subversive nature of God's kingdom, and the way of Jesus. He turns expected ideas and conceptions about him upside down. He is not the expected triumphant leader.

## ***Discussion***

The contrasting symbols raise questions for our purpose and our identity as a church.

*Which will we choose to symbolise us – lion, eagle, fox or hen?*

*Do we see ourselves as first or last? Are we more vulnerable, or victorious? Are we represented by a throne or a cross?*

*What implications do these things have for how we see ourselves as a Christian church, as followers of Jesus?*

*How might our answers shape our future identity?*



## **2.3 Gathering and scattering**

Luke often uses the verb “gather,” and he frequently pairs it with “scatter.” Here the people are described as chicks to be gathered.

For example, see Luke 11:23b - “whoever does not gather with me scatters.” Jesus’ actual death on the cross gathers people initially as a mocking community around the victim.

Immediately following Jesus’ death (23:48) “the crowd that had gathered for this spectacle were scattered, and “they returned home, beating their breasts.” Instead of the expected satisfaction of witnessing a victim get his just desserts, they somehow transform and return home beating their breasts.

The cross is transformative, and in gathering we are transformed so that we can be scattered as the church in the community.

Jesus offers us a new means of being gathered as a community, but it is as the victim, not the victimiser. Jesus gathers us like a hen, not a fox.

## ***Discussion***

*What does it mean for us to be a 'gathered' community?*

*What does it mean for us to be a 'scattered' community?*

*How does having the cross at the centre of the transformation of the gathered community help us to identify who we are as church?*

## **2.4 Prophets and persecution**

Jesus has made it clear that a prophet must be killed in Jerusalem. There is no magical reason why prophets had to die in Jerusalem. Rather, Jesus is reflecting on the history of how past prophets had been treated by the people of Jerusalem.

The irony that Luke wants us to note is that this city, this Jerusalem, this temple, this house of God, the most sacred space in Israel, becomes the scene of persecution and murder of prophets.

Luke tells us that Herod sought to kill Jesus. But we find as the story unfolds that the real threat to Jesus was not Herod, but Jerusalem.

*How is it that this holy city of David, the religious capital of Israel, has the reputation as the city that kills prophets, and will demonstrate this soon by crucifying Jesus?*

*Why is it that so often the religious establishment is the place that has conflict with prophets?*

*Is Luke raising the question that the most severe persecution of prophets has generally been at the hands of the religious establishment in any age?*

*How do you think the church today treats its visionaries, prophets and idealists?*

We can choose, as a church, to follow the example of Jerusalem, or of Jesus. We can silence our prophets and visionaries, or we can be 'good citizens' of the institution.

The model of faithfulness to God's purposes means vulnerability and suffering, rather than power and authority.

*What implication does this have for our church as we consider our possible futures?*

*What does it mean if we just find that we are at a point where all we have left is the phrase 'our house is left to us'?*

## 2.5 Closing prayer

God of the guiding star,  
the bush that blazes ...  
show us your way.

God of the stormy seas,  
the bread that nourishes ...  
teach us your truth.

God of the still, small voice,  
the wind that blows  
where it chooses ...  
fill us with life.

God of our inward and outward journeys ...  
set our feet on your road today.

Ruth Burgess



## Lent 3 *Wilderness Journey*

### Study Three

Our readings this week are ***Luke 13:1-9*** and ***Isaiah 55:1-9***. Both raise some interesting questions about our relationship with God and the expectations of discipleship.

#### **3.1 *Isaiah 55:1-2***

*“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. 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.”*

What a generous offer this passage starts with. Though we tend not to believe in free lunches, the God of infinite mercy and divine grace apparently does.

But it is the question that follows that is really important. ***“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?”*** says God.

Surely this is a most pertinent question for our time. Addicted as we are to consumerism, we work in order to make money for things we often don't need, and which are depleting and destroying our planet (see *The Story of Stuff* website <http://storyofstuff.org/> for great resources on this topic).

This suggests that a lifestyle built around consumerism and individual concerns is ultimately not only unsatisfying, but will lead to death rather than life. *So what is it that can truly satisfy us?*

Well, suggests God, you might start by listening to me, and considering your relationship (covenant) with me. This is one of those things that are simple to say, but difficult to do.

Many of our scriptural stories emphasise this, by telling us that everything goes pear shaped when we do not listen to God, and when we seek for more than we need.

This pattern starts with the story of Adam and Eve who listened to the other creatures rather



than to their creator, and who sought more than what they needed.

## **For discussion**

*Who is it we spend our time listening to?*

*How much time are we prepared to devote to prayerful and contemplative discernment?*

*How much time do we give to studying scripture?*

*What are the implications of this for the spiritual health of the church?*

Compare this passage with Amos 8:1: *"The days are coming," declares the Sovereign LORD, "when I will send a famine through the land--not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD"*.

*What in our modern world blocks us from listening to God and prevents our entering into a nurturing covenant relationship with God?*

In the passage, God sets out a generous and abundant feast.

*What is the difference between excess and abundance, especially as it relates to how we live?*

### **3.2 Luke 13:1-9**

*1 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4 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? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."*

*6 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. 7 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?'*

*8 He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"*

## The concept of *metanoia*

In the first century, there was a belief that people suffered bad things because they had sinned and were out of favour with God. Jesus' question and answer challenges this notion, by presenting both incidents as chance, and by focusing on the concept of *metanoia*.

This word is most often translated as *repent*, but it would be better translated as *a transformative change of heart and mind, a complete realigning of one's life, especially inner life, or a spiritual conversion*. The story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 is a story of such a transformation.

The author of Luke-Acts uses the terms *metanoeo* (verb) and *metanoia* (noun) 25 times in his writings, which is almost one half of the fifty-eight occurrences of these words in the New Testament. So we can assume it is a very important concept in this gospel.

Jesus is challenging his hearers to 'change their hearts and lives', suggesting that no less than a radical change in behaviour and attitude is what is called for. And Jesus does not offer this statement as an optional extra – it is a requirement.

This concept is then demonstrated by Jesus with the story of the fig tree. The tree, symbolic of both Jews and disciples, is not bearing fruit. God, the vineyard owner, says, "It is not bearing fruit. Cut it down." Jesus, the gardener, asks for one more chance: "Give it one more year. I will work the soil a bit and put some manure down."

Jesus wants to work the soil so that *metanoia* can happen, and the fruits of such a transformation will be produced.

The fig tree represents a time of faith that should be brought to fruition, a movement from vagueness to clarity of purpose, and from indecision to action.

## **Discussion**

This story is about how *metanoia*, conversion to the way of Jesus, permeates all of life.

*Metanoia* is not a static process, Like the fig tree, each year fruit should be produced. *Metanoia* calls for a continuing radical conversion and profound change in our lives and in our churches. It should disrupt the status quo and complacency of our lives and our faith communities.

Through Luke's gospel, Jesus' words make it clear that true *metanoia* requires that we continuously deny ourselves and take up our crosses — something we are not especially good at, and which we have little experience of or desire to do.

Jesus is proposing in this story that we should be exchanging a mediocre faith for a faith of purpose and vitality. This is a real challenge to our Western churches, influenced as we are by Western culture and traditions.

*In what ways do you think the church needs to show a radical conversion, a profound change of mind and heart (metanoia)?*

*What are the stumbling blocks that would prevent us from 'bearing fruit'?*

Richard A. Cleveland, author of *Reflections* ([emmausjourney.org](http://emmausjourney.org)), suggests that we have a tendency to assure ourselves that our comfortable church-attending habits are all that is necessary to be people of faith.

*How do you react to this statement?*

Lent is the season for answering Jesus' call to *metanoia*. In our times of reflection, we can start to discern what may need changing in our faith journeys leading to transformation in how we live out our faith. And as we are transformed, surely we will begin to transform those around us.

### 3.3 Prayer

**Quieten** your minds and spirits ...

sense the presence of God

**Lament** those things that you call to mind,

that you wish had been different ...

different words spoken ...

different actions performed ...

**Confess** and let go

of those things that hold you ...

**Repent**

and **seek transformation** in your life ...

**Make a commitment** to walk a new

and different way in the coming days ...

**Amen.**





## Lent 4 *Wilderness Journey*

### Study Four

Our reading this week is ***Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32***, usually called 'the parable of the Prodigal Son'. We find some significant issues on forgiveness, justice, grace and reconciliation in this parable.

#### *Parable of the lost sheep*

1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

3 So he told them this parable: 4 "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'

7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

### *Parable of the lost coin*

8 "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' 10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

### *Parable of the two sons*

11 Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. 12 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. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.

15 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. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

17 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! 18 I will get up

and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."

20 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.

21 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.'

22 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. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'

28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 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. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!

31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 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.'

## **4.1 Introduction**

The story itself is very famous, even in non-religious circles. The only other parable as well known as this one is probably the Good Samaritan, which is also unique to Luke's gospel.

*Given how familiar it is, there is a danger that we will assume that we know what it means.*

Probably the part that most of us tend to recall is the welcoming home of the son by a forgiving father. The part we tend to forget is the rather dark and open ending where the older son refuses to join the party. And perhaps that is the part we need to be thinking about the most.

One reason we concentrate on the first part of the homecoming may be due to the name the parable has become known by, “the Prodigal Son”, which does tend to give a specific lens through which we then interpret the story.

Yet the word “Prodigal” is not used in the story. That title comes from a marginal note made by a scribe copying the manuscript several hundred years after the time of Jesus, and it has stuck.

A better title for the story is “The Lost Son”, sitting as it does, in Luke 15, after the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. After all, at the end of the story, the father says of the younger son that “he was lost and is found.”

Luke’s gospel shows great interest in the marginalised of Jesus’ world. The lost son is one of these marginalised, even if it is by his own deeds. But we can also argue that the older brother has also become marginalised, due also to his own deeds.

## For discussion

There are three main characters in this story: the establishment (scribes and Pharisees), the sinners (tax collectors, prostitutes, and the like) and Jesus. All three are represented in the parable.

### 4.2 The younger son

The younger son's initial strategy is to get the most out of life by taking the blessing from his father and spending it on himself. He embodies the “eat, drink, and be merry” approach of a life free from care or responsibility.

But he learns quickly this is a mistaken approach. Having ‘squandered his property in dissolute living’, his dire situation produces a transformation in his thinking, and he resolves to return home in a state of *metanoia*, or repentance.

The younger son represents the view of the tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners who come to Jesus and are welcomed by him, in the same way the father received back his lost son.

Reduced to dire circumstances, they find Jesus' care for them a source of **metanoia** and grace, and find the inspiration to turn their lives around.

*How would you describe the younger son's motivation for repentance?*

*Whose perspective on the son's return do verses 20-24 present?*

*Whose perspective is offered in verses 25-32?*

### **4.3 The older son**

*Imagine that you are a Scribe or a Pharisee back in Jesus' time. You are a faithful reader of scripture, follow Torah, and are religious, modest and sober. You are genuinely interested in what Jesus has to say, as comparing and arguing the interpretation of scripture with your fellow teachers is part of*

your day's work. You certainly don't see yourself as a hypocrite.

*How do you feel about what Jesus is saying in a story clearly aimed at you?*

#### **4.4 Which son are we as the church?**

*Who are we in this parable?* Most of us have had experiences like the younger son, times when we know we have done wrong or hurtful things and are grateful for God's gracious forgiveness that gathers us up and welcomes us home.

But are we also the 'establishment', people that see ourselves as 'good citizens', obedient to society's laws and norms and therefore considered successful and blessed?

*Can we honestly identify with the younger son, the people on the margins of our society?*



And if we are the older brother, *what would it look like for us to fully accept those on the margins as brothers and sisters and be reconciled?* That young Aboriginal man in prison for using ice, for example — what would it mean for us to call him brother and be reconciled?

*How do you think a ‘prodigal’ or ‘lost’ church which has truly grasped the concept of **metanoia** would or should behave?*

## 4.5 The loving father

In chapter 4, Luke makes it clear that Jesus' entire ministry has been about proclaiming Good News for those usually considered to be outsiders to God's family: the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. In proclaiming the coming of God's kingdom, Jesus is helping everyone, no matter who they are or what they have done, to see that they are welcome.

TW Manson says that in Luke's setting for this parable,

the purpose is to "justify the attitude of Jesus to sinners by showing them that his way is the fulfilment of God's will concerning them, and that the way of the scribes and Pharisees is the wrong way....God loves the sinner while he is still a sinner *before* he repents; and that somehow it is this Divine love that makes the sinner's repentance possible." (Fitzmyer, *Luke*, p.1086)

*What do you think Manson means by this, and how do you feel about it?*

This parable should be more troubling and unsettling for us than it probably is. We are far more like the establishment than we care to admit. We tend to think of ourselves, as many people in churches do, as among the upright, moral, law-abiding citizens of the establishment. Luke invites reflection on this attitude by ending his story in an open-ended and unresolved way that demands some honest personal reflection and discussion on who we are as a church.

The story invites us to follow Jesus in the way of reconciliation and peace, and to live a grace that is personally costly. It invites us to be reconciled with all brothers and sisters in love, no matter who they are or what they have done.

Both sons in the parable live in a way that suggests they think love must be earned. The younger son comes to see himself as bad, undeserving of any love from his father. The older son takes his father's love for granted, and is offended that it is shared with an undeserving wretch.

Marcus Borg writes

Will the elder son join the festivity? Or will he let his own standard of proper behaviour prevent him from joining the celebration? Will the protesters' commitment to the quest for holiness make them adamant that outcasts such as these cannot be part of the people of God?

For them to have accepted the invitation would have required a seismic change in their understanding of what the people of God were intended to be, a radical reorientation of both their perception and their animating vision, one that would fundamentally transform their social world.

*Do churches today need a 'seismic change in their understanding of what the people of God were intended to be, [and] a radical reorientation of both their perception and their animating vision'?*

## 4.6 To conclude:

*How are we the father, who so generously welcomes back the lost son?*

*How are we the son, who believes he is now undeserving?*

*How are we the older son, seeing himself as a slave, unjustly asked to serve the sinner who returns, and join a celebration of the reunification of the household?*

## 4.7 Prayer of the Day

Holy God, Word Shaper:

you are not our accountant, but our lover;  
you are not angry at us, but you forgive us;  
you are not our enemy, but the One

    who runs towards us with wide open arms,  
throwing steaks on the grill to celebrate our newness!

Jesus Christ, Shaper of our story:

you travel to that distant country of our sin  
    to bring us home once again;

you share your inheritance with us  
    so we might be blessed;

you know the famine of our spirits  
    and fill it with your hope.

Holy Spirit, Life Shaper:

surrounded by your grace,

    we offer glad cries of salvation;

encircled by your constant love,

    we shout for joy;

enclosed in your comforting arms,

    nothing can overwhelm us.

God in Community, Holy in One, from now on

    we will remember our life in you. Amen.

*Thom Shuman*

# **Lent 5   *Wilderness Journey***

## **Study Five**

This week, we are to read and reflect on three of the Lectionary readings, ***Isaiah 43:16-21***, ***Philippians 3:8-14*** and ***John 12:1-8***. Each reading speaks of transformation, of letting go of the old, and of looking ahead to what new things God might be doing.

### **5.1   *Isaiah 43:16-21***

- 16 Thus says the LORD,  
    who makes a way in the sea, a path in the  
mighty waters,  
17 who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior;  
    they lie down, they cannot rise,  
    they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:  
18 Do not remember the former things,  
    or consider the things of old.  
19 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.  
20 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,  
21 the people whom I formed for myself  
so that they might declare my praise.

***Isaiah 43:19*** particularly leaps out at me. Isaiah writes, “I am about to do a new thing ... do you not perceive it?”

The passage invites us to embrace the new things of the future, while still honouring the past. But “behold I am doing a new thing” is a message many churches have difficulty hearing. We tend to sit in the equivalent of a modern wilderness, and we don’t always see a clear pathway ahead. We are pulled by the creative tension between tradition and innovation, and past and future.

The passage invites us to consider the possibilities for the future. It invites us to be open to God’s ‘new thing’.

*How hard is it for churches to find a clear pathway and let go of the things that hold us back?*



*How can congregations connect more fully with God's actions in the world?*

*What spiritual disciplines could help us to understand what 'new thing' God might be calling us to?*

## **5.2 *Philippians 3:8-14***

8 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 9 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.

10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death,

11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

12 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.

13 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, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

In Philippians 3, Paul says: “*forgetting what lies behind ... I continue my pursuit toward the goal.*” We ought not to discount the past—after all, our moving forward as congregations depends of the commitment of those who have gone before us.

Here, Paul recognises that an active faith is not backward-looking, nor is it content to rest on its laurels. Faith should always be an evolving thing, because, like every relationship, it needs to be worked on and renewed.

A congregation with a healthy relationship with God will ensure it is spiritually nourished, and will have learnt from its past. It should be inspired by visions of the future, whilst being grounded in the traditions of the past.

*What do you think “forgetting what lies behind ... I continue my pursuit toward the goal” might mean for our church today?*

*Do congregations tend to look far more in the rear view mirror than at the road ahead?*

### **5.3    *John 12:1-8***

1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

3 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.

4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

6 (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.)

7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

John deliberately contrasts the actions of Mary with the words of Judas. The gratitude, love and sacrifice of Mary who anoints Jesus' feet in the light of Jesus' imminent death, and the false

piety of Judas are set in opposition to each other.

**Mary** shows her dedication and service to Jesus; Judas is the one who will betray Jesus. Mary lovingly, if unknowingly, prepares Jesus for death, and burial.

**Judas** is presented as being attached to money. Judas keeps for himself, and Mary gives of herself. Where Mary sacrifices, Judas seeks self-benefit.

Mary's action is bordering on the scandalous, yet she is prophetic, as this story points forward to the last supper, where Jesus washes his disciples' feet. But John, known for his inclusion of dubious yet faithful women in his Gospel, presents Mary as the one who got it right.

*Should the church act in more 'scandalous' or prophetic ways?*

*What might this look like?*

*Are we good at 'sacrificial giving' as a church?*

*How do we reconcile the seeming incongruity between our natural make-up and God's intent for us?*

We need to understand human instinct and human desire at a deeper level. We might begin with St. Augustine's memorable phrase:

*You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*

When we analyse our natural makeup, natural instincts, and natural desires more deeply, we see that all of these ultimately are drawing us beyond the more-immediate things and pleasures with which they appear to be obsessed. They are drawing us, persistently and unceasingly, towards God.

God said, *"Remember not the things of the past, the things of long ago, consider not; see, I am doing something new!"*

*What was the "something new" that God was talking about?*

*What is the "something new" God gives to us in our day?*

*Does God give to you in your own life?*

## 5.4 Questions to conclude

1. *What do you think is the role of a prophet?*
2. *Why do you think ancient empires carried away the artists with the political leaders?*
3. *Who are "re-readers" of Isaiah's text today?*
4. *What is the "something new" that you long to see God do?*
5. *What is the still-speaking God saying to the church today, in a new day?*

*A final question: Are we so focused on the past that we have forgotten to expect the unexpected? Have we forgotten that we worship, and listen for, a God who is still speaking, and still acting, today, and that we cannot even begin to imagine the great things that God is about to do?*

## 5.5 Closing Prayer

God, you are always calling your people to follow you into the future,

inviting them to new ventures, new challenges,

new ways to care, new ways to touch the hearts of all.

When they become fearful of the unknown, give them courage.

When they worry that they are not up to the task, remind them

that you would not call them if you did not believe in them.

When they get tired, or feel disappointed with the way

things are going, remind them that you can bring change

and hope out of the most difficult situations.

*Neil Paynter*

