40 Days of Hope

Six Bible Studies for the Lenten Journey

By Rev Dr Cliff Bird
Prayers by Rev Jon Humphries
‘I warmly commend the Lent Event Bible studies as a way to deepen our personal and communal Lenten journey. Cliff Bird has distilled, in the Lenten gospel readings, the deep hopefulness that enables us to embrace Christ’s challenge to live oriented to the Reign of God. The authentic stories from our partner churches further enlighten us to God’s work in the world today, inspiring us in practical ways to live out the Kingdom.’

Rev Alistair Macrae

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All prayers by Rev Jon Humphries. Lent Event resources can be downloaded free of charge from www.lentevent.com. Printed copies can be ordered by calling (02) 8267 4267.

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ABOUT UNITINGWORLD

UnitingWorld is a national agency of the Uniting Church in Australia. Our vision is to see transformed communities who honour God, experience hope and well-being and live free from poverty and injustice. We achieve this through genuine and vibrant partnerships between people and communities here in Australia, Asia, Africa and the Pacific.

We believe this is what it means to partner in God’s mission.

Connecting Australian church communities with this mission is a big part of what we do. We achieve this by helping our church here in Australia - from individuals to congregations to youth groups to schools - to be effective global partners who are passionate about God’s mission in the world and their role in it.

For over a decade, Lent Event has invited Australian congregations to a deeper understanding of what poverty is and highlighted the imperative for the Church today to embrace those on the margins, to seek justice and to share resources.

Bible Studies, worship resources, activities for children and daily prayers provide a catalyst for people and communities across Australia to connect with the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world, to listen to their voices and learn from their experiences.

Lent Event is just one way you can engage with UnitingWorld and connect with the Uniting Church in Australia’s overseas partners. Our prayer is that along the way you will be challenged and motivated to pray, act and connect on a deeper, more engaged level.

It’s all about developing real connections on a global level.
A WORD ABOUT LENT

Lent is a period in the Christian calendar that's associated with some important traditions, including:

Journeying with Jesus toward Jerusalem and beyond
The gospel writers Matthew, Mark and Luke present Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem as an invitation for us to join Jesus on the way. According to Luke's gospel, immediately after Jesus ‘set his face to go to Jerusalem’ (9:51 NRSV) comes the narrative of ‘the would-be followers of Jesus’ (9:57-62). All three men for various reasons did not follow Jesus on the journey. Luke’s question for us, therefore, is will we follow Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, or do we have other more urgent tasks to attend to? Through this Bible Study series and other resources for Lent we journey with Jesus to Jerusalem and beyond. We do this as disciples of Jesus today.

Engaging in the (re)building of relationships
The essence of Easter is about reconciliation – the renewed relationship of humanity with God, of humanity with each other, and with God's 'very good' creation.

Lent provides an occasion for us to mend broken relationships and build new ones and the opportunity to right the wrongs of both past and present. Lent also provides an opportunity to repent from the ways in which we trample upon the Earth.

Imposing limitations
Various practices of self-imposed limitations and restraint are usually exercised during Lent. These include observing a fast, giving up unhealthy habits, foregoing some level of comfort and luxury (for those who have them) or giving up certain foods and drinks. The motivation for such self-imposed limitations is quite noble – it is not simply an inward journey of desiring to be more Christ-like, but also an outward journey of being an agent of God's love and compassion to a world that is hurting. To be Christ-like is to move toward a fuller realisation and sense of our common humanity and Lent provides an occasion for us to give up a part of ourselves in order that another may have the chance to live.
The season of Lent is here. Over the next six weeks we’ll be journeying together through Lent to Easter. Thanks to Jesus’ resurrection the journey takes on an unprecedented new beginning when death seemed to have won! We are part of this new journey and these studies are our resources on the journey. Let us pray together that we will all be enlightened, encouraged and strengthened as we go through the studies.

One useful and now common way of looking at the Bible is in terms of stories – stories about people, their cultures, experiences, fears and hopes.

Interwoven with these human stories are stories of God and stories about God as experienced and understood by the story-writers. We read these stories, learn from them, ask questions and think about how they do or don’t resonate with our own stories. How might the stories in the Bible guide and empower us as our own stories continue to unfold and develop before us and before God?

Ours is a storied world. Stories of the past and present abound and stories will be created for the future. Many of the stories that saturate the airwaves are on the negative side of the spectrum: death, war, suffering, poverty, injustice. At the same time there are also stories of generosity, kindness and hope. Somewhere in these stories must be the relevance of the story of Jesus, and Lent provides us with the precise moment to seek out this relevance for today in truth and sincerity. Jesus himself lived and worked in a world of contradictions and paradoxes. Over the next six weeks, with the Spirit of God to guide us, let us strive to discern how God’s story of hope in Jesus Christ helps us to live and shape our own stories.

Rev Dr Cliff Bird
The theme of this Bible Study series is ‘40 Days of Hope’. The studies can be done in groups of two or more people, or used as a journey guide for individual reflection. The studies, which are based on the Gospel readings taken from the Revised Standard Lectionary, are as follows:

**Study 1 (Mark 1:9-15 cf. Matthew 4:1-11)**
Hope and our Christian Journey: Living Today’s Will of God

**Study 2 (Mark 9:2-9)**
Hope for All People: The New Exodus Beckons

**Study 3 (John 2:13-22)**
Hope for All Creation: When Eco-Justice Prevails

**Study 4 (John 3:14-21)**
Hope in Unlikely Places: Inclusion of Non-Believers

**Study 5 (John 12:20-33)**
Hope Overflowing: A Glimpse of Life at its Fullest

**Study 6 (Mark 14:1-11)**
Hope Leads Us Forward: Deeds of Love Amidst Schemes of Death

Each study follows a basic format. The studies are written in a way that encourages all participants to actively engage with the biblical texts. Prayers lead into and close each study while questions for personal meditation, prompts for group discussion and additional resources assist deeper thinking and active engagement. Each study also includes stories from UnitingWorld’s partners around the world. These stories point us beyond ourselves and toward the experiences of our overseas church partners and the communities they serve.

Through these stories, we are given the opportunity to look at life from another point of view and to hope for a more just, equitable and humane society.
Opening prayer

Lord, remove the scales from our eyes this Lenten season and enable us to swallow our human pride so that we can respond to your call in our lives – especially when it challenges us. Amen

Nathan Eddy (editor) 2014
Fresh from the Word, 93

Introduction

Traditionally, the gospel reading at the start of the Lenten season focuses on the temptation of Jesus. The temptation of Jesus as told by Matthew is in mind in this study. Traditional interpretations of the three temptations say that the devil tempted Jesus with food and pleasure, power, glory, wealth and popularity. However, the devil's role in the temptations is far more subtle and points us to an understanding of our call to live today's will of God.

Read Matthew 4:1-11

Personal Meditation: What do you think this passage is about? What is your initial response? What main challenge does the story have for you?
Reflection

The story of the temptation of Jesus occurs immediately after his baptism by John in the Jordan, during which the Spirit of God came down on him and a voice from heaven affirmed him as ‘my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ What exactly is the role of the devil in the temptation of Jesus? A very brief look into each temptation will help us to address this question.

The first temptation was for Jesus to turn stones into bread to fill his stomach. What is so wrong with such a request? After all, Moses cried out to God in the wilderness and God sent down food for the hungry Israelites. Would God not do the same on behalf of the beloved Son? By performing such a miracle people would have recognised him as the New Moses, the prophet of the end time, the deliverer of Israel, and they would flock to his banner. After all, this was what the people had hoped and longed for. Was Jesus not aware of this? Was it the pinch of doubt that he was indeed the Son of God that held him back from performing the miracle? Whatever the reason, Jesus turned the temptation aside by responding that he would not live by bread alone but by ‘every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’

The second temptation was for Jesus to worship the devil in exchange for glory and authority. Exactly what did the devil show Jesus? It was the kingdom of David, which had grown to become a world empire. Expectations were exceedingly high amongst the Jewish people for the restoration of David’s kingdom from the oppression of the Roman rulers. Restoration of Israel would be a vindication of the honour of God. So this temptation again reflected the collective consciousness and hope of Israel, and the perceived will of God for God’s chosen people. Did Jesus not share this collective hope and consciousness? Did he not discern that restoration of David’s kingdom was the will of God? Jesus again brushed aside the temptation with the words, ‘It is written, worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him.’

The third temptation was for Jesus to prove himself a super human being who was immune to death by throwing himself from the temple pinnacle. Surely, the courtyard would be filled with people. They would immediately recognise him as the Chosen One of God to rescue Israel. After all, Malachi had prophesied that the Lord would suddenly appear to cleanse the temple of pollution and to purify the priesthood and restore true worship in Israel.
Was this the priestly Messiah? Once again the devil played into the collective expectations of the people. Jesus refused for the third time with the words ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’

Oh the subtlety of the devil’s role! The devil tempted Jesus with what everyone knew to be the will of God: the Mosaic Prophet (Prophet like Moses); Davidic King (King in the line of David); and Priestly Messiah (Messiah who would restore the royal priesthood and true worship). There was nothing wrong with any of these. These were the very images of redemption which every Israelite believed God had given them through the Scriptures. However, when tested against his own sense of calling, Jesus saw these as second-best to that which God intended for them.

What the devil offered to Jesus were not outright evils, but the highest goods known to Israel. This is when evil is most difficult to discern – when it offers the good instead of the best. The devil offered yesterday’s will of God but Jesus was living out today’s will of God through his declaration and practice of the reign of God. In the confluence of the devil’s tempting and the enabling and strengthening power of the Spirit, Jesus was able to see the ebbing of an old novelty and experience the appearing of a new – that transforming power had begun through him and the gospel that he preached and lived.

As we move through Lent, and through life, may we journey with Jesus Christ, living out God’s will in every aspect of life, knowing full well that today’s will of God may even go against public opinion and collective consciousness, and hence be quite counter-cultural. Let us affirm that with the Spirit’s help we will!

Questions for Discussion

1. Share an experience where you struggled to make a tough decision between conflicting and/or opposing opinions or possibilities.

2. How might you be able to discern today’s will of God on issues where public consciousness and popular opinions hold powerful leverage in decision making?
Going Further

Lent Event encourages participants to give up an everyday item to experience in part what it is like to live with less. Write down a list of things you could give up this Lent. After that, write a list of practices you’d like to take up this Lent. Look over each of the things you’ve listed and pray that God will enable you to learn what it means to live in today’s will of God, even when it is countercultural or perhaps risky to do so.

What I could **give up** this Lent
- 
- 
- 
- 

What I could **take up** this Lent
- 
- 
- 
-
Closing Prayer

God, 
God of all, 
God with us, 
As we take our first steps in the season of Lent, 
Take us deeper into your love. 
Take us into truth, that we may learn and grow. 
Connect us to your grace and compassion, 
So that we may hold onto hope when we come to the place where we have to face our shortcomings. 
Push us into the wilderness of reflection, 
Test and strengthen us as you reveal your will in our lives. 
As we travel with you on the story to the cross; 
As we journey to the cross and beyond, 
May we take up our own crosses and follow you anew.

Jesus, 
Walker of the Way, 
Lead us again this Lent into deeper discipleship. 
Mould us as your people. 
As we remember your commitment to us; 
Your new covenant of love, 
May we join anew with you in the being of the Kingdom. 
God, 
God of all, 
God with us, 
As we take our first steps in the season of Lent, 
Take us deeper into your love. 
This we ask in the name of Christ. 
Amen.

Rev Jon Humphries 2015