

# COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS:

Church resources for Lent 2010



## Readings

**Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-21**  
**Isaiah 58:6-10**

## Sermon notes

### Lent as a new way of living

- There is something strengthening about the start of Lent. The Old English roots of the word for Lent mean 'lengthen' and relate to the time when the days get longer as spring begins. It's a season of new potential, new life and new opportunity – as we follow Jesus' example of right living.
- Lent remembers Jesus' retreat into the wilderness, where he shaped the vision for his mission through prayer and fasting.
- Here, in the face of temptation, Jesus rejects worldly status and respect in favour of whole-hearted, God-centred worship: 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only"'
- Godly living naturally follows. The second command, '...and love your neighbour as yourself' is the natural consequence and outworking of this worship. Jesus is setting the pattern for his mission: a God-centred life marked out by compassion.
- As the body of Christ in the world today, we too are called to compassionate living.

### Lent as a time of fasting

- In the reading for Ash Wednesday (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21), Jesus gives us a clear warning about outward demonstrations of piety intended to impress others. Again, Jesus rejects outward show and the pursuit of worldly adoration and status.
- But it is not just about the kind of fasting Jesus rejects. The fasting Jesus commends is fasting that only God sees and rewards.

- The Sermon on the Mount points to Jesus as the fulfilment of the law. This section calls to mind Isaiah 58, which addresses the subject of true fasting. True, God-centred fasting is also about 'feeding the hungry' and 'loosing the chains of injustice'.
- Only then does fasting bring about transformation: light in place of darkness and day after night.

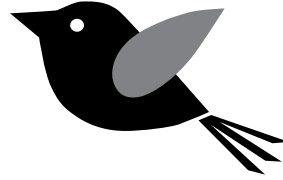
### Lent as an exercise in the right use of power

- Jesus' 40 days in the desert show us a mature relationship with power.
- The struggle for a just world, in which the dignity of each person is respected and there is no poverty, demands of us a good relationship with power.
- Poverty and injustice are issues of power: poverty is caused when power is denied. And the abuse of power leads to systems that perpetuate inequality and injustice.
- In this time of unprecedented wealth and resources, extreme poverty can be ended if we join with one another and together put down our own desire for worldly status and power in order to uplift and strengthen those who are poor. Only then will all people be empowered to make choices about the economic, social, personal and political aspects of their lives.

### Lent as a time of right relationships

- God does not respond to empty displays of religion or empty words of praise. True praise brings justice and righteousness (Amos 5:21-24). Pure religion is to look after the orphans and widows (James 1:27).
- Jesus' Lenten focus is the true worship of his Father in heaven. And as he denies himself the world, the transformation of the world begins – born out of the extraordinary value God places on each human life.
- Is it time to change Lent's focus? *Count Your Blessings* could help us make Lent a journey into justice, as we look forward to the restoration of the cross.
- Lent is not about what we give up: fasting is only the beginning. It is about our hearts – about worshipful living that leads to a fuller relationship with God and each other.

## Prayers



Loving God,  
We live in a world where so many people's  
dreams of justice and peace lie in ashes.  
As we follow you into the wilderness,  
help us to take on the struggle for  
justice and peace  
for those who no longer can.  
As we face Jerusalem,  
mark us with your love,  
and release in us a passion for your justice  
in our disfigured world,  
so that we may turn from our guilt and  
face you,  
our heart's desire.  
Amen

Holy and immortal God,  
You desire not the death of a sinner,  
but rather that we should repent of our  
sins and live.  
Forgive us for choosing to inhabit our  
places of comfort  
rather than following you to the cross.  
In our repentance, gather us into a  
new community  
which cherishes the earth and all its people,  
and bids us to embrace your giving  
and sacrifice,  
in which all life is found.  
Amen

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