

BRF LENT BOOK

Sally Welch

# SHARING THE EASTER STORY

From reading to  
living the gospel



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To my brother Richard, with heartfelt thanks

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# Introduction

One hundred years ago, in 1922, at a church in south London, the Fellowship of St Matthew was begun in response to a congregation's eagerness for informed and helpful support in building a habit of daily Bible reading. In 1926, it became known as the Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) as its influence spread and more and more church communities subscribed to the notes and prayers which were offered.

Today, BRF resources people and groups as they grow in faith, encouraging them to deepen their relationship with God and to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others.

This Lent study book is written in response to BRF's vision of 'Sharing the Story', by looking at the events leading up to Easter. It will take you on a journey through familiar and unfamiliar parts of the Bible, reading and reflecting on our Christian faith.

But first we need to explore what it means to share our story. For me, it begins with *listening* – listening deeply and carefully, to God, to others, to the world and to ourselves. With careful listening will come a greater degree of *understanding*. We will never understand everything, but as we stretch our minds and our hearts, we will progress and grow – and our faith will deepen also.

Once we have listened to the word of God and understood it as far as we are able, we must take time to *reflect* upon it. During difficult and stressful times, I have found it extremely helpful to take a Bible passage and just spend time thinking about what it means. Sometimes the passage brings wisdom for my situation; sometimes it doesn't speak to that at all, but I gain some other insight.

The process of listening, understanding and reflecting leads to our being able to absorb the passage into our hearts. We begin to *live* the biblical wisdom as we seek to act upon its teaching and adjust our lives accordingly. That is the stage at which we might begin to share with others the insights we have gained, when we begin to *tell* others the story of God's saving love for each of us. Once we have told it, the story is *shared* – we become part of a community of storytellers, of good-news givers, of children of the gospel. Then we may *become* the story we reflect upon, live and share.

And what is this story? What are the elements of the last few weeks of Jesus' life, his death and his resurrection which bring hope to the world? We begin by beginning again – by acknowledging our wrongdoing and seeking God's help to turn our lives around to face the direction in which God is moving. Once we have repented, we can forgive and be forgiven, a constantly renewing challenge to give and receive forgiveness. This is achieved because we place our hope in the resurrection – we witness the kingdom breaking through into our lives and the lives of others, and so reinforce our trust in God and in his Son, who will deliver and redeem all those who put their trust in him. We reflect on the sacrifice of God in Christ and learn what it is to live sacrificial lives ourselves, offering prayer and praise through worship and service to the one who gives us grace without asking for anything in return. As we approach the end of Lent and arrive at the glory of Easter, we can journey boldly wherever God leads us, secure in his love and, through that love, able to love ourselves and to offer love to others, putting our faith in the hope of the kingdom and becoming transformed into God's new creations.

You will notice that all the chapter headings use the present participle – they are all active, 'doing' words. This is because the process is a constant one, full of energy and motion. It is my hope that the Bible stories will take a grip on your imagination, encouraging you to think deeply about all they contain. This book does not aim to prescribe, but to invite you to join me on a journey through Lent to Easter, discovering what it means to 'share the story' of our faith.

## Sharing the Easter story as an individual

Every week in Lent you will be introduced to a different element of the Easter story, journeying through the story-sharing process. A short Bible passage is followed by a reflection, a prayer and some questions to help you reflect for yourself on the passage.

You might like to read the passage out loud, slowly and carefully, allowing time to let the words sink in, pausing at the end of each sentence. You might take one sentence or word which stands out for you and learn it by heart, holding it in your thoughts throughout the day, perhaps journalling what it has come to mean for you by the evening.

At the end of each week there is a suggestion for a creative prayer and further questions, which can be used by both groups and individuals.

## Sharing the Easter story as a group

The readings and reflections in this book have been set out so that a rhythm of daily study and prayer can be established. In this way a habit of daily encounter with God, which will build us up in our faith and encourage us on our journey, can be formed, renewed or reinforced. I have also tried to encourage the habit of theological reflection by including questions to think about at the end of each day's reflection. These questions can be used by individuals, but also as a group to reflect on the theme of the week.

The suggested timetable is for meetings to take place during the week after the date of the readings in question, and the questions are therefore arranged so that groups can begin during the week after Ash Wednesday (that is, the week commencing Monday 7 March), looking at the material for Week 1 (2–6 March). The final group meeting is after Easter Sunday and can be held that week or the following week. In this way, we can be encouraged to think about what comes next – the story didn't end at Easter!



The readings and reflections in this book can be used in different ways by all sorts of groups. They can form the basis for a weekly Lent group or provide topics of discussion at Lent lunches or suppers. They can be used as conversation-starters for groups that already meet, such as midweek fellowship groups, Mothers' Union meetings or men's breakfasts.

If a new group is beginning and is meeting in person, it is a good idea to include refreshments with each meeting – some groups find an evening meal with discussion round the table very popular, while others feel that drinks and biscuits or cake are more appropriate. This kind of hospitality can break down barriers and introduce people to each other in a relaxed way, which in turn will lead to a livelier, more fruitful discussion.

If you are leading or joining a group, remember that everyone will need their own copy of the book well before the beginning of Lent.

## Suggestions for group meetings

The group leader may or may not also be the group host. Either or both of these roles may be fixed for the whole of Lent or rotate among the group.

If the group leader and host are different people, they should liaise beforehand to ensure arrangements are in place, the time and date are fixed and refreshments are available.

### Introduction

Make sure each person has a copy of the book and that spares are available for those who do not. Introduce newcomers to the group and make them feel welcome. Remind everyone that they do not have to contribute to the discussion if they don't want to, but that conversation will be livelier if they do!

### **Opening prayer**

Use a prayer within the traditions of the group; this will help put people at ease, and those who are familiar with the traditions will lend confidence to those who are not. A song or hymn can be sung.

### **Discussion**

If the group is large, split into twos or threes to discuss reactions to the week's reflections. Allow time for each person to share, if they wish. If discussion is slow to start, suggest that each person offers one word or sentence that sums up their reaction.

### **Forum**

As one group, try to discern some themes that are common to most people. If it helps, write these down and circulate them among the group.

### **Reflection**

Study the group questions, and spend some time in silence so that individuals can reflect on the theme personally. Come together to discuss the questions. Again, if the group is large, it is helpful to split into smaller groups.

### **Plenary**

The leader draws together the themes arising from the discussion and sees whether they mirror those from the week's reflections. Again, these can be noted for later distribution.

### **Prayer**

It can be helpful to begin your prayer time with silence, in order to meditate on the results of the discussion. Suggestions for creative prayer can be found at the end of every week – these can be used in a group or as an individual. This can be followed by open prayer. Be flexible, allowing time for each person to contribute if they wish.

### **Closing prayer**



## Week 1 | Wednesday 2 March–Sunday 6 March

# Repenting

We begin our study on Ash Wednesday, that day in the church calendar dedicated to a wholehearted acknowledgement of our sins. Some church traditions sign foreheads with the burnt ashes of last year's palm crosses – a visible, external sign of a repentant soul. This action heralds the start of Lent, a time for reflecting on our lives, attempting to correct the errors that we discover and determining to move forward in God's grace.

Repentance is a complex concept. It begins with that vital first step of recognising our sinfulness – that which we commemorate on Ash Wednesday – but this is only the first step along a lifelong journey of learning to live and love in and through Christ.

Repentance involves accepting and acknowledging our wrongdoing – to ourselves and also to others. Repentance has to be taken into our hearts rather than just spoken on our lips; it must be lived, not just stated.

Repentance involves restitution – we must endeavour to restore that which our actions have damaged and those whom our words have wounded. Where restitution is not possible, we must accept the consequences of our wrongdoing and bear those burdens gracefully and prayerfully.

We must acknowledge that judgement of others is not ours to give and that sharing repentance involves living forgiven lives ourselves rather than telling others how to live. We must take up the offer of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, made to us at our baptism and constantly renewed each time we ask in penitence and faith.

Finally and most importantly of all, we will see throughout this week that, as well as accepting our wrongdoing, repentance involves accepting our forgiveness as well. Every one of us is an heir to the kingdom. All we must do to inherit it is to ask.

Those who heard this asked, 'Who then can be saved?' Jesus replied, 'What is impossible with man is possible with God.'

LUKE 18:26-27 (NIV)

| Wednesday 2 March (Ash Wednesday)

## Listening, understanding and reflecting

### 2 Samuel 12:1–15

And the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, 'There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveller to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.' Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.'

Nathan said to David, 'You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from

your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the Lord: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbour, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.’ David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’ Nathan said to David, ‘Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die.’ Then Nathan went to his house.



## Reflection

Whistle-blowers have a curious reputation in this country. The British government is clear about what constitutes whistle-blowing: ‘You’re a whistleblower if you’re a worker and you report certain types of wrongdoing.’ It is also clear that the wrongdoing must be ‘in the public interest’ and that whistle-blowers are protected by law (see [gov.uk/whistleblowing](http://gov.uk/whistleblowing)).

But the reality is more complicated than that – there is often a feeling that the whistle-blower is somehow at fault: maybe they misinterpreted what was happening or they are being disloyal to their employers. Many times the whistle-blower, although not able to be sacked, leaves their post anyway because they are made to feel so uncomfortable. There is no doubt that whistle-blowing takes courage and determination.

The first character we meet in this story is one of the original whistle-blowers – he is calling out the actions of his king because they are so wrong that they must not continue any longer. Nathan has been sent by God, so he has that degree of certainty on his side, but all the same it must have taken a huge amount of courage to enter the

king's chamber and pronounce judgement against the most powerful man in the country. But there is no shirking of his responsibility – as a prophet, Nathan knows that it is his role to hold people to account, to remind them of their obligation to God and to their fellow citizens.

Fortunately for him, Nathan has also been gifted with intelligence and cunning – instead of marching in front of David and baldly listing out David's wrongdoings, he wraps his message within a story. In this way, he hopes to draw David in unawares, encouraging him to think in the abstract about the rights or wrongs of his action, rather than be put immediately on the defensive.

We don't know how David listens to the story – is his imagination immediately captured so that for him the characters become real and he is passionate in his denunciation of them? Or has the enormous power he now wields so corrupted him that he sits back in apathy, pronouncing the death sentence as just one among many careless sentences he passes as king and judge? Either way, the thunderous statement 'You are the man!' must have hit him like a lightning bolt, as David realises he has sat in judgement upon his own actions – and condemned them.

Dear, lovely, flawed David! We prefer our action heroes to be continually brave, continually self-sacrificing, always walking the righteous path. But here the Bible shows us once again how power and wealth can corrupt even the brightest and best of us. Gone is the humble shepherd boy, placing his faith in God and a slingshot. Gone is the beleaguered warrior, hiding in caves from the wrath of a mad king. Here instead is an entitled, despotic ruler, abusing his power and taking whatever he wants.

Those who like their heroes to be untarnished have tried to place the blame on Bathsheba, saying that she tempted David with a glimpse of her naked body, or to opt for the 'true love should let nothing stand in its path' argument to defend David's actions. These are poor reasons indeed for the slaughter of a fellow human being. And when finally

David is forced to confront his own wrongdoing, that original David, buried beneath so much gold and pomp, is revealed once more. In a return to his former brave, trusting self, he doesn't offer any defence or justification: 'I have sinned against the Lord,' he states, admitting his offence and repenting of it in the same breath.

David is forgiven. But all sins have consequences. Although his repentance is genuine and accepted as such, the result of his sin remains – Uriah is still dead, Bathsheba unlawfully taken. And so, the child must die.

Where does this story take us, living today in our less exalted situation, unlikely to have become corrupted by too much power or indeed to have killed another human being? It reminds us that we need courage to confront the wrongdoing in this world, but that nonetheless we must continue to do so. But it also warns us that none of us are sin-free. 'I am that man', we should perhaps be saying to ourselves on a daily basis, calling us to repentance, reminding us that we must first take the log from our own eyes so that we can see clearly to remove the speck from those of our neighbour (Matthew 7:5).

We should not despair, however, nor fall into that mire of self-hatred for all our sins. Our sins will be forgiven – Jesus has died to make this so. And today, Ash Wednesday, is the first step along the road to repentance and forgiveness, as we not only admit our wrongdoing, but also vow to make every effort to put things right and to 'sin no more'. The death of that innocent infant at the end of the story reminds us that sins have consequences which must be lived with even after forgiveness is obtained – these we must put right if we can; endure if we cannot.





## Questions

- Think of an occasion when you have witnessed wrongdoing – whether in your personal or work life. How did you react? What was the effect of your actions? On reflection, would you act in the same way again?
- ‘You are the man!’ What impact does that statement have for you?



## Prayer

*Loving Father, like David I try to ignore the things I have done wrong. I try to justify my actions; I blame others for my offences; I plead temptation impossible to resist. Help me to face up to my sins and accept responsibility for the many ways in which I have hurt you and others. Lead me towards true repentance and, even though I don't quite achieve this, forgive me anyway. All this for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, my Saviour. Amen*

| Thursday 3 March

## Living

### Matthew 3:1–11

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
“Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.”’

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

‘I baptise you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’



## Reflection

We finished our study of repentance yesterday at that moment of extreme crisis and recognition: ‘You are the man!’ declared Nathan; ‘I have sinned against the Lord,’ replied David. Fantastic stuff, yes, but just the beginning of the journey of repentance, which is not only lifelong but daily.

It seems from today’s reading that simply asking for forgiveness is not enough. The Pharisees and Sadducees who come to John for baptism are told in no small way that John’s baptism is not the end of it – they must truly live their repentance. The leaders of the Jewish religious authorities thought they had it all sorted – they kept the laws, they were diligent in prayer and in attending worship at the temple. It was all under control. But John looked into their hearts and saw pride, selfishness, arrogance and hypocrisy, and he called them out. It isn’t enough to follow the law with your heads, he says to them; you must live it in your hearts.

Today is a good time to ponder whether we, too, aren’t a bit guilty of behaving like the Pharisees and Sadducees. When we gather in church or reflect privately and consider our sins, are we really conscious of having ‘trespassed’ against God and against our neighbour? Or do we secretly feel that our sins are not such great ones – or, at least, not as great as those of other people we know – and maybe we don’t need to repent quite so heartily. This process of allowing our repentance to move from being on our lips to in our hearts happens gradually and constantly, and must be continually refreshed, as we remind ourselves again and again of how short we fall of all that we can be and do.

The daughter of a friend of mine has a young child, and although she delights in being a mother and dotes on her son, she occasionally struggles with ‘parental guilt’. She wants desperately to be the best parent she can be, but is aware that she falls short time and again – when her tiredness makes her impatient; when reading the same book

for the 15th time is not enjoyable; when the prospect of another rainy afternoon playing cars in the living room fills her with boredom rather than excitement. Raising a child is a humbling business!

But lived repentance is not about feeling guilty all the time – that would be tiring and fruitless. The origin of the word ‘repent’, we are frequently told, includes the concept of turning away from old habits and attitudes and turning towards a new way of life. Repentance is an action, not just a thought. It requires positive choice, a determination to move forward in a new way, reclaiming our humanity and putting it to the service of God and others.

That new mother is learning to accept perfect parenting doesn’t exist – but heartfelt parenting does, and it is the better option. Perfect repentance would mean a perfect life. As human beings, that is beyond our ability. But each day offers fresh opportunities for new beginnings, better choices and positive steps along the road of the kingdom.

A repentant life is a joyful one. It is an ‘I can’ experience: I can change; I can grow; I can live more fully. But it is also an ‘I can’t experience’: I can’t do this alone. Only from God will we find true repentance; only through Christ can we be wholly forgiven; only with the Spirit can we live out that repentance, bearing fruit worthy of that constant renewing of our hearts and minds, turning again and again towards the light which shows us the way.

And there is one further step – that of restitution. As part of repentance, we should seek to put right that which we have made wrong. Thus Jesus instructs us to seek reconciliation with those with whom we have argued before coming to worship:

If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

MATTHEW 5:23–24 (NIV)

Sadly this may not always be possible – those whom we have wronged may not accept our apology; the damage caused by our actions might be irreversible; it may be too late to put things right. Then we must bear this as best we can – the life of David’s child was not spared and David had to accept the consequences of his sin, striving only not to make the same mistake in the future.



## Questions

- What relationship can you improve or change? Perhaps one needs to be ended before it damages you further.
- Think of one way in which you could improve your use of time. This could be significant, such as taking up a Bible study, joining a prayer group or serving in church, or not so dramatic, such as trying to pray every time you put the kettle on or getting up earlier to make some time in your day to reflect.
- Think of one habit or activity you would like to take up – or put down. Be imaginative and creative in your thinking; it doesn’t just have to be about running or smoking!



## Prayer

*Help me, dear Lord, to bear fruits worthy of repentance. Show me a picture of a repentant life and draw me ever closer to your heart.  
Amen*



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Living Faith  
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To find out more about our work, visit

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Join Sally Welch in exploring two questions: **what is the Easter story really about**, and **how do we share it?**

Through each week of Lent, a different aspect of the Easter story is examined: **repenting, forgiving, hoping, trusting, sacrificing, loving and changing**. Within each week, the days are focused on what we need to do in order to share the story: **listening, understanding, reflecting, living, telling, sharing and becoming**. Each day offers a Bible passage, followed by a reflection, questions and a prayer. Suggestions for group study and creative prayer activities are also included.



Sally Welch is a parish priest of 20 years' standing, having ministered in both rural and urban contexts within the Diocese of Oxford. She is currently the diocesan spirituality adviser and co-director of the Centre for Christian Pilgrimage. Sally is a committed pilgrim and has walked many pilgrim routes in the UK and Europe, with plans for many more.

*'Sally Welch is an expert guide for the journey through Lent. **Sharing the Easter Story** is both clear and deep, challenging and refreshing, and Sally leads us back to the foundation of our faith to find fresh grace and hope in challenging times.'*

**Steven Croft, bishop of Oxford**

*'With her gifts of attractive clarity, biblical insights and human warmth, Sally guides us through the wealth of themes connected with the Easter story. Those who read this book will find their imaginations stirred and their hearts renewed in resurrection hope.'*

**Michael Mitton, author of *Restoring the Woven Cord***



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