

LENT 2019



Lent with **New Daylight**

Rediscovering who we are as God's people



Includes **Lent group study material** and daily Bible readings

Lent with
New Daylight

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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Lent with **New Daylight**

Edited by Sally Welch

Lent 2019

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Introduction

As regular readers of *New Daylight* will be aware, my personal spiritual practice is based around pilgrimage. The spirituality of pilgrimage – broadly defined as ‘a spiritual journey to a sacred place’ – and its disciplines can be extended out from the actual physical journey into all aspects of everyday life and prayer, offering insights from the road that apply equally well at ‘home’, whatever that may be.

One of the most wonderful and challenging things about pilgrimage is how much time you have to spend with yourself. All your preoccupations, all your busyness that takes you from one activity to the next, are stripped away, and you are left with the basic necessities of travelling to the next place of food or shelter. Even if you do not journey alone, there will be times when you have run out of things to say and you simply walk along, each member of the party immersed in their own thoughts, face-to-face with their true selves, perhaps for the first time in many years.

It is for a similar reason that I like the period of Lent, the 40 days before Easter, a time traditionally set aside for those preparing for baptism on Easter Eve. These people would, as part of their final preparation, leave behind all the things of this world that got in the way of their relationship with God. They spent time in fasting, prayer, serving the poor and other disciplines of the Christian life. They went through final instruction in what being a Christian was all about. They prepared for lives of loving service in the world.

So may we take up this ancient tradition and use Lent as a time for renewing our relationship with God, stripping away all that has accumulated around our souls – the distractions with which the world has surrounded us – and preparing to rediscover who we are as God’s people.

We are called to face our fears and our failures with courage and dignity, relying on God’s love and mercy. We are called to be God’s children once again.

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday – a serious day. Of all the days in the church calendar, it is the one that most invites us to inner reflection and self-examination. Ash Wednesday encourages us to look at the pattern of our lives, to make space for God and to re-engage once more with prayer and study, if this has been lacking, or to extend and deepen our practice

if we already incorporate these into our daily lives. We are invited to take a good, hard look at our relationship with God and with our neighbours and to repent and turn away from any destructive ways into which we have fallen, in order to train ourselves into new habits. At the threshold of this time of reappraisal and examination, let us expect transformation and a deepening of understanding of the Christian way.

As we begin this Lenten Bible study, we will be helped in our reflection not only by the writing of the authors, but also by a series of questions that they have framed in order to direct our minds and help us engage with the issues their studies are highlighting.

We focus first on the practice of contemplative prayer, introduced to us by Margaret Silf. She offers, through her reflections and prayers, guidance on how we might incorporate this practice into our own lives, and shows us how our knowledge of God might grow deeper through a pattern of silence and meditation.

We continue our Lenten journey with Liz Hoare and Michael Mitton, who lead us through studies of place and ‘non-place’ or exile. Through their writing, we are encouraged to examine the importance of place in our own lives, and what it might mean to be ‘in exile’ today.

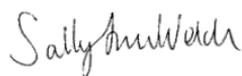
Finally, we walk the road to Easter in the company of Naomi Starkey, as she explores what it means to ‘understand’ the life and message of Christ in ourselves and in the lives of those around us.

As you journey through Lent in the company of these wise and experienced writers, I pray that you will find the help and support you need to make a good and holy Lent, preparing yourself in your heart and mind and soul for that most joyous festival of Easter.

Heavenly Father, grant that through our prayers and study this Lenten season we may enter more fully into the joy of Easter, with hearts and minds prepared to celebrate the mystery of your love. Amen.

What do you hope to gain from this Lent study?

How will it fit into the pattern of your daily life?



**See pages 72–73 for suggestions for how to use
this material in a group setting.**



Lent study reflections

Contemplative prayer

I walk regularly around my own neighbourhood and know every path and tree along the way, but familiarity, I realise, can make me blind. So every so often I say to myself, 'Suppose you didn't live here, but were just visiting. Look at these paths, these trees, as though you were here for the first time in this present moment. Listen to the birds you hear every morning, and hear them for the first time.' Then I see everything with fresh eyes. I appreciate what I see. I even say 'thank you' for it.

Contemplative prayer is rather like this. It can help us see the world, and the people around us, in a fresh light, revealing the extraordinary within the ordinary and turning our garden hedges into burning bushes. It can open our inner eyes to see more deeply into the mystery of things – to tune in to the pulse of God throbbing through all creation.

I once visited a wild and beautiful place on a remote Scottish island, where sea eagles make their homes. It was easy in such a location to feel close to the divine mystery. Afterwards, in a gift shop, I discovered that someone else had also experienced this sense of the entire wonder of life present in every single part. I found an unusual painting: a perfect image of a sea eagle painted on a feather not more than 10cm long – the whole eagle revealed on one of its feathers. What an amazing piece of art, and what a perfect reminder that the whole of the divine mystery is present in every part of creation.

To enter into contemplative prayer, we need to come to silence and stillness, adjusting our life's pace to the much slower heartbeat of eternity. In an age that demands rapid results and fast fixes, this is countercultural. In a culture that prefers to take an instant harvest from the supermarket shelves, the task of contemplation is the patient preparation of the ground of our hearts for spiritual seeding, so that God can do the growing.

I hope these days of exploration may help you slow down your heart's clock, that you might feel the pulse of the divine presence, moment by moment, sustaining your life's journey.

MARGARET SILF

At home in God's heart

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God. Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.

We can learn contemplation from the humblest of God's creatures. I discovered this one morning on mainland Orkney off the north coast of Scotland, where I was visiting the 5,000-year-old Neolithic chambered cairn at Maeshowe.

The guide led us across the fields and through a low entrance gap into the ancient inner chamber. Human life had ebbed and flowed here through five millennia, its passing celebrated in hallowed ritual, and an awed silence fell as we breathed in the atmosphere of this sacred space.

Silence, that is, except for the occasional rustle of wings, as a mother swallow circled the chamber around her family of chicks, apparently oblivious to our intrusion. She had built her nest in the place that would have been the focal point of the rituals once performed there, and ever since, the guide told us, she was always there in the chamber, focusing on what mattered most – the raising of her brood. She was surely one of God's natural contemplatives, with everything to teach us.

A key component of contemplative prayer is the art of focusing. Some people use a familiar word or phrase, such as 'Maranatha' or 'Come, Lord Jesus', to help themselves come to a focused inner stillness. Others let their gaze rest on an object, such as a flower, or a sacred symbol or image. This keeps the normally over-busy conscious mind peacefully occupied, and allows us to enter a deeper stillness, just as I entered the ancient stillness of the cairn that morning. But it was the swallow who taught me more than any prayer manual could have done. She knew what mattered most, and she allowed nothing to distract her from her holy task.

*May my heart stay in orbit around what matters most,
wherever my mind may wander.*

MARGARET SILF

Basking in the light

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

A story is told about a man who used to go into his local church when all was quiet and simply sit at the back and gaze straight ahead. The pastor noticed this and began to wonder whether this silent visitor might be seeking help. One morning he approached the man and asked him gently, 'Is there anything I can do for you?' The man looked up in some surprise and said, 'Thank you, but there is nothing I need. I love to come in here and sit still and I just look at him, and he looks at me.'

This is contemplative prayer – just sitting, gazing into the heart of the mystery and letting the mystery gaze back upon us. No words needed. Today's reading invites us simply to let the light of God shine upon us, bringing grace, peace and blessing. A big ask – yet all we have to do is to let it shine.

If you live in a climate where the sun rarely shines, you will know how eagerly we go out and bask in it when it does, wanting nothing more than simply to soak up the warmth and the light. In countries in the throes of drought, people rush outside when the precious rain falls, just for the joy of being exposed to the life-giving water soaking down to the roots of their being.

Contemplative prayer is rather like this – simply basking in the warmth and light of God's love, simply letting ourselves be drenched in life-sustaining, life-restoring grace.

Quakers speak of prayer as 'holding someone in the light'. No need to verbalise our problems or tell God what needs to be done. Enough just to be held in the light.

*To be blessed by God is as simple as letting ourselves bask
in the light of God's love.*

Windows into mystery

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

At this time of the year readers in the northern hemisphere can look out at the natural world and see the deciduous trees still closed up in the sleep of winter. Soon the new buds will sprout and the branches gradually transform into springtime green. As the temperature rises, the flowers will emerge, and, in the fullness of time, the fruits. If we had never seen this miracle before, could we believe that all this new life is already there inside the tree that looks so lifeless?

And suppose we found caterpillars eating our cabbages in the garden, and someone were to tell us that there is a butterfly inside each one of them. Would we believe it? If we didn't know the whole story, wouldn't we think that maybe the leaves, flowers and fruit were deposited on the tree by some outside agency? Would we not think that the butterfly had flown in from some exotic land?

Contemplative prayer opens a window into that deep interior, inviting us to catch a glimpse of the fruit inside the tree, the butterfly inside the caterpillar and, most amazingly, the fullness of the kingdom of God latent inside our own hearts, awaiting the fullness of time, and grace, for its flowering. We can't force it. We can't even imagine it. But we are invited to believe in it, and to nourish it in the silence of contemplation – the seed-bed and the nursery of divine transformation.

May we learn to stop our frantic search for the kingdom, so that we can become still and know its reality deep within us and all around us.

MARGARET SILF

Rooted in God

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

Trees are great teachers. Among many other things we learn from them, as in today's reading, is the fact of the intimate connection between the roots and branches, each depending on the other for the fullness of life. This surely applies not just to trees but also in our own lives. The branches of our outer lives can never thrive if the roots of our inner lives are not planted deep in the soil that both sustains them and gives them stability and a place of belonging.

The psalmist reveals that the tree whose roots go deep into the living water will survive the dry seasons and bring forth leaves and fruit in due time. Those whose lives are planted in God will likewise bear spiritual fruit.

This connection reminds me of an oil lamp. One end of the wick must be immersed in the oil and the other end extended into the world, otherwise there will be no light. The same is true for us. Our lives, ideally, are both contemplative and active. If they are to bear fruit, we must ensure that our hearts remain immersed in God, while our lives also branch out into the world, bearing fruit. All contemplation and no action means that, however faithful and intense our prayer, it will not find expression in the wider world. All action and no contemplation means that any fruit our lives might bear will quickly wither for lack of deep sustenance.

Happy the pilgrim who, like the tree in the psalm, finds a balance between contemplation and action, for that pilgrim's life shall bear fruit that will nourish a spiritually starving world.

May our deep invisible roots remain immersed in the ocean of God's love, so that the branches of our lives may survive the drought and bear fruit for the nations.

How to use this material in a group

Traditionally, most readers of *New Daylight* use the notes and reflections as part of their individual study and, of course, this Lent booklet can be used in this way. The readings and reflections are set out in the usual way, so that the rhythm of daily prayer and study can be continued. Those who are using *New Daylight* for the first time will find all they need within this booklet to begin a habit of daily encounter with God that will build them up in their faith and encourage them on their journey.

Additional material has also been provided so that those who wish to can meet together to share their Lent studies and insights. Questions have been written by the authors of each set of reflections, which relate both to the material for each day and to the whole week's worth of readings.

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 of Ash Wednesday (that is, the week commencing Sunday 3 March), looking at the material for the week commencing Sunday 24 February. The final group meeting is after Easter Sunday and can be held that week or the following week. In this way, we encourage people to think about what comes next; the story didn't end at Easter.

This material can be used in a number of different ways by all sorts of groups. It can form the basis for a weekly Lent group or provide topics of discussion at Lent lunches or suppers. It 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, 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.

Remember to provide prospective members of the group with booklets well before the beginning of Lent. The reflections begin before Ash Wednesday and they will provide a useful way into the style of *New Daylight* before the meetings begin.

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 booklet 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 member offers one word or sentence that sums up their reaction.

Forum As one group, try to discern some themes that are common to most members. 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. This can be followed by open prayer. Be flexible, allowing time for each person to contribute if they wish.

Closing prayer.



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Ideal for church groups and individual use

This special Lent edition of **New Daylight** Bible reading notes has been created for use by individuals and groups. It features questions for group discussion alongside reflections by four well-loved contributors from the January–April 2019 issue, and provides a compact and affordable Lent course to deepen readers' engagement with the Lenten journey and encourage the sharing of insights and experience.

Daily Bible reading notes can play an important part in sustaining and growing faith wherever you are on the Christian path.



‘However busy the rest of the day may be, this is the time I carve out to sit and be quiet with God... The lovely thing about **New Daylight** is that you get to know the authors. Very often I find their words will come back to me during the day and I'm sure that's the work of the Holy Spirit.'

Debbie Thrower, founder and programme leader of **The Gift of Years** and long-time reader of **New Daylight**

In her introduction to **Lent with New Daylight**, Editor Sally Welch offers helpful suggestions for using this resource in different church groups. The contributors are Margaret Silf, Liz Hoare, Michael Mitton and Naomi Starkey.



Sally Welch is Vicar of Charlbury with Shorthampton and Area Dean of Chipping Norton in the Diocese of Oxford.



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