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Introduction

Lent has always been a time of solemn preparation in the church, as disciples seek to enter into the way of the cross and share, insofar as we can, the struggles of Jesus as he faces towards Jerusalem. In the early church, Lent was the main time in the year when new believers, or catechumates, were prepared for baptism and full membership, culminating in a long vigil on Easter Eve and their initiation into the Body of Christ in the first eucharist of Easter Day. Nowadays, Lent is one of the main times when many churches and individual Christians try to take seriously the call to study, pray, fast and commit themselves to the challenge of God's kingdom in some special, or more focused, way. Many folks join Lent groups, give up some luxury or commit themselves to acts of solidarity and social justice. Some churches have recovered the ancient tradition of using Lent as a time for preparing new believers. So there is a sense of Lent being a significant season both for those new to faith, just beginning their journey of discipleship, and those who have been walking in the way of Christ for many years. All of us are called to this journey of deepening commitment, wherever we are on the journey and whoever we are.

We hope that this resource, written by a range of *Words for Today* writers, will be of value to both individuals and groups during Lent, whether you are very new to faith, or whether you have walked this season many, many times before. Our writers are drawn from different parts of the world, different denominations, different theological and spiritual traditions, and different perspectives on the Bible. We hope that each, in their unique way, will cast fresh light on Luke's text, and help readers to walk afresh the road towards the cross and beyond, to Easter joy and resurrection.

Nicola Slee

Editor



Beginnings

1 Theme introduction

Preparing for the week

In this week's readings from Luke's gospel, we consider the work of John the Baptist in preparing the way for Jesus, we recall Jesus' baptism and temptations in the wilderness, and the beginning of his teaching and healing ministry in Nazareth.

In his mission statement in the sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-27), Jesus becomes the herald and agent of liberation to the poor, the one who puts the content of their hope into words and then devotes his life to its fruition. We are called to share in this mission – requiring us to become 'poor in spirit', willing to let go of worldly power and status and identify ourselves with those who are marginalised and commit ourselves to their liberation. Poverty is not good in itself, but where it leads to a deeper dependence on God and coexists with generosity it can be a rare grace – remember Jesus marvelling at the widow's mite (Mark 12:41-44). This week, we are invited to consider both the poverty that must be resisted and that which must be embraced.

For further thought and prayer

- Does insecurity make me more self-seeking and less caring about the needs of others, lessening my humanity, clouding my sense that people matter more than money?
- Or does our current worldwide turmoil strengthen my compassion and fuel my commitment to God's kingdom?

Notes based on the New Revised Standard Version by

George Wauchope



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Reading 1

In Africa, when a head of state visits another country, an advance party is sent to that country for security reasons. The party checks to ensure that the suite in which the head of state will sleep is not bugged, that there are no explosives there; and they also book themselves into strategic rooms next to the head of state in order to ensure his protection. They go to the places he is going to visit to make sure all is well. The advanced party is trained in what is called 'VIP protection'. A lot of money is spent on this, money that could otherwise be spent on alleviating the problems of the poor. And, incidentally, the security budgets for the countries that embark on this expensive exercise are usually three times the budget for health and education in those countries.

Well, the forerunner of the Prince of Peace is a 'maverick' called John the Baptist whose security concerns are the cleansing of the sinners through a baptism of repentance. For Jesus there is no VIP treatment. There is no room for him in the inn; he is born in a humble stable and is meek and mild. Does he need tight security? No! In fact he has come to lay down his life for the salvation and redemption of humankind. Compared to the heads of states referred to above, Christ is the Prince of Peace and of his reign there shall be no end.

No VIP treatment

Luke 3:1-14

Lord, help us fix our earth-bound longings on peace and justice in this world.



Reading 2

Salvation for the whole person

Luke 3:15–22

Luke begins his account of the public life of Jesus with a long introduction to the political and the religious leaders holding power at the time. He says: 'In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar's reign' (verse 1). This would already be enough to arrive at the date, but he goes on giving the names of other important people: the governors of Palestine and of neighbouring territories, the high priests Annas and Caiphas. These VIPs played prominent roles during state functions and sat in prominent places for all to see.

Why all this detail? Luke wants us to keep clearly in mind that he is not about to tell us a nice fable, a myth, a legend, fruit of the extravagant imagination of some dreamer. The events he is about to write about are concrete history. God has intervened in the history of humankind at a clearly identifiable time and in a very definite place. God has sent his son to bring salvation to all humankind.

But the salvation brought by Jesus Christ must reach out to the whole person, to include every moment of our lives. It is this society, this community, this family, this concrete person that must be transformed. Thus the only true religion is the one that changes this world, that produces new relations among people and yields fruits of peace, love, justice and sharing where now there is greed, corruption, selfishness, oppression and injustice. Whenever we think of the reign of God, we should associate it with love, joy, peace, justice, righteousness and mutual respect.

In whatever we do, Lord, help us remember the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace and the rest.



Reading 3

Jesus' mission statement, his manifesto as it were, is found in this passage. He is anointed by the Holy Spirit and sent by God his Father to proclaim good news to the poor. The only news that can be 'good' to the poor is the eradication of their poverty and its causes. And poverty means the lack of basic needs such as food, clean running tap water, clothing, shelter, health care and education.

Why is it that Africa is poor and cannot look after its own? The answer is colonialism, with its evil corollaries of military conquest, racism, economic and political subjugation, exploitation of cheap labour and the transportation of raw materials. In his book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Walter Rodney explains in detail how this was done.

What really surprises me is that African leaders who sacrificed their lives in order to liberate their countries are the ones who behave like the shepherds that Ezekiel alludes to who do not eat and clothe the sheep but grab the resources of the land for themselves (Ezekiel 34:2b-4). How can close to two thousand people die of cholera in Zimbabwe today, a disease that is easily preventable? How can the sewage pipes burst with no money to repair them? How can a sane leader boldly state that there is no cholera when the death rate is increasing by the day? The man who placed his life in danger by fighting for the liberation of Zimbabwe has successfully run down that same country so that it is now on the edge of complete chaos.

Lord, may your message of good news transform the whole world and bring joy to those who are the most damaged members of our society.

Good news to the poor

Luke 4:16–30