

1 Welcome

Welcome to this study

This study has been designed to be undertaken in two different contexts: by groups meeting in parishes or other ministry units (for example, schools or workplaces), or by people on their own to do at home. You might want to do it as a family.



There'll be passages from the Bible to look at and questions to think about, and to answer in groups if that's the context you're using. Listen to the responses that others give, and rejoice in the diversity of views and experiences – it's one of the delights (and occasional difficulties) of church communities that we can be so different from one another, and yet come together to worship and pray and work, serving the communities around us.

There are six studies, which correspond to the six weeks of Lent. Each of these engages with some aspect of a call from God. Some of these are calls to the Church as a whole and to all Christians, others are a more individual call, to a particular role or life. As we go along, we'll meet a collection of people who have responded to God's call in the past.

- 1 Welcome – and a call to holiness
- 2 A call to discipleship
- 3 A call to service
- 4 A call to a prophetic life
- 5 A call to a vocation
- 6 A call to the ordained life

Welcome to Lent



Lent is the period of 40 days leading up to Easter. It begins on **Ash Wednesday**, the day when we're invited to receive on our foreheads a cross in ashes as we resolve to put aside the sins and failures of the past and seek a new beginning with God. Traditionally the ash is made from the burnt palm crosses of the year before. It

helps us to face up to our own mortality, as we're encouraged to reflect on the love and redemption offered to us by Christ.

On Ash Wednesday the priest invites us to “observe a holy Lent.” Lent is a time for intentional growing into God through reflecting on scripture, deepening community with other Christians, prayer, and reflecting on our identity as Christians through baptism. Observing Lent was first undertaken in the early church by those undergoing final preparation for joining the Christian community through baptism, which happened at Easter. It helps all of us to get ready to walk with Jesus through his betrayal, execution, and resurrection in the “Great Three Days” (from the evening of Maundy Thursday to Easter Day). Its 40 days parallels the 40 days of testing and trial that Jesus spent in the wilderness between his baptism and the beginning of his public ministry, and so it can be for us too a journey into the wilderness – a place of encounter with God.

Keeping Lent

It’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking that Lent is something we do as individuals, especially if we focus on something we’re “giving up for Lent.” It can help to see Lent as a community discipline, a time when together we take up or lay down certain practices, for example by attending a Lenten service or a study group. Or members of a ministry unit – or a family – might experiment with a new prayer practice or a service project. Traditionally Lent is a time for fasting and self denial, and also almsgiving (giving money or other things to those in need): what might you do together with others?

If you’re wanting to “give something up” for Lent, here are some suggestions for a different kind of fasting:

- from devices: putting aside your mobile phone for a period each day
 - from noise – embracing silence instead, and listening out for God
 - missing one meal a week and giving the money you would have spent on it to a charity
 - from complaining or gossiping
- ❖ ***How do you react to some of these suggestions? What would you find hardest to give up for a period?***
- ❖ ***How do you want the world to be different, when Easter comes, because of how you have kept Lent?***

A useful reminder:

Lent is 40 days, but if you count up the days between Ash Wednesday and Easter there are 46 days – how does that work? The Sundays aren’t fast days – and that means that whatever you give up for Lent, you can do or have on a Sunday.



A text for Ash Wednesday: Joel 2:1-2,12-17

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—
a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
 a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
 nor will be again after them in ages to come.

Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
 rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
 for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
 and relents from punishing.
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
 and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain-offering and a drink-offering for the LORD, your God?



Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly; gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged;
gather the children, even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy.

Between the vestibule and the altar
 let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.
Let them say, 'Spare your people, O LORD,
 and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
 "Where is their God?" '

This passage from the prophet Joel is a call to draw closer to God, for a people who have experienced a catastrophe, described in chapter 1 as a devastating plague of locusts. The devastation is interpreted as "the day of the Lord" (Joel 1:15), a day of ultimate judgment that many associate with the end of the world. In response, the prophet calls for fasting and lamentation.

Joel calls for the whole community to gather – young and old alike – to recognise their need for repentance, to fast, weep, and ask for God’s mercy. There’s a focus not on externals but on what’s going on in people’s hearts – “don’t tear your clothing in your grief, but tear your hearts instead.”

Joel speaks of the blessing that is possible for Israel, if only they would repent.



We often associate “repentance” with feeling sorry for things that we’ve done, but in the Bible, it’s more about turning away from evil, turning back to God. It’s about wanting to be faithful, accepting the challenge to live as God wants us to live. Here God’s people are called to a change of heart, to commit themselves again to follow God. This is a God who is gracious and abounding in steadfast love, a God who wants to welcome the people back. It’s to that God that the Church turns during Lent.

- ❖ ***What do you think of the communal nature of Joel’s call, the emphasis on the entire community gathering to seek God? Have you experienced anything like that?***
- ❖ ***How might you do Lent communally this year?***

Other texts for Ash Wednesday:	
Isaiah 58:1-12	Psalm 51:1-17
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10	Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Welcome to this theme

God’s Call

The idea for this study comes from a sense that many of us who’ve been around church for a while can feel disconnected from the idea of God’s call on us. If we think about this at all, it’s in the context of a lofty encounter with God that comes only to a very few people and leads to them either leaving for an overseas mission field or else to ordination. But the things God calls Christians to be and to do are much broader than that! Some calls involve the Church as a whole, and all of its members; others are specific to a person, sometimes just for a season in their life,



sometimes for longer. In these studies we'll look at a mixture of these, and in the process meet a collection of people who've sensed that call and what they did with it.

❖ *What's your initial reaction to this? Does it excite you?*

❖ *Have you ever sensed God calling you to something? And – whatever you answered – how do you feel about that?*

The Call to holiness

“As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” (1 Peter 1:15-16)

The Church itself, and all who are part of it, are called to be holy, and to mirror the holiness of God.

❖ *That sounds like a big ask – what's your reaction to this?*

Biblical call stories involving God's holiness

Isaiah 6:1-8:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

Exodus 3:1-15

When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then he said, ‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’

When we say that God is holy we're acknowledging that God is Not. Like. Us. “To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One.” (Isaiah 40:25) This can be an uncomfortable thing to think about. We're more used to images of God as loving parent, or shepherd, or pictures of Jesus teaching and healing, and we shy away from holiness, maybe because we don't understand it. One of the things we find in the creeds is a statement that the Church is Holy. It's holy because the Holy Spirit lives in its members, holy because the Spirit guides its mission. Holy because it is set apart – because we are set apart – to be signs of God and worshippers of God in the midst of the world around us. And the church is holy because its members are called to be holy, because its members are saints. That was how all the New Testament churches were described – as the saints that met in a particular place. That doesn't mean they

were perfect – anyone who has read any of the New Testament letters knows how far short of perfection those communities fell (just look at Corinth!).

- ❖ *How do you feel about the idea that we're called to be holy, to be saints?*
- ❖ *How might we help each other to grow in holiness? Any ideas?*
- ❖ *What does "the holiness of God" mean to you?*

Holiness is counter-cultural. Partly in the sense that holiness or wanting to be holy gets a bad press: imagine if you went to school or work and mentioned to someone that you'd been to a study looking at becoming holy! And partly in the sense that the rest of the world – the people and the institutions where God isn't on the radar – have a different set of values.

Writing to the Romans, Paul said: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:1-2)

- ❖ *What might this mean? What might a renewed mind look like?*

A holy community: Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.



Remember that the "you" in this is plural, not singular.

- ❖ *What would it be like to live in that sort of community?*
- ❖ *How would a community like that look from the outside?*

Meet some holy people



Brother Lawrence (1611-1691) was a humble cook in a monastery who continually “practiced the presence of God” while doing routine tasks in the kitchen. He would ask God to work with him, so that his work might be the very best, and he would offer that to God. “During my work, I would always


continue to speak to the Lord as though he were right with me, offering him my services and thanking him for his assistance. Also, at the end of my work, I used to examine it carefully. If I found good in it, I thanked God. If I noticed faults, I asked his forgiveness without being discouraged, and then went on with my work, still dwelling in him.” (*Practice of the Presence of God: The Best Rule of Holy Life*)

Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) was an English anchoress who lived in a cell attached to her church and was a spiritual counsellor to many. Her book, *The Revelations of Divine Love*, reveals great spiritual awareness and a trust in God’s love and goodness. She said, “He that made all things for love, by the same love keepeth them, and shall keep them without end.”



Wanting to live a holy life is about reclaiming our heritage as Christians. It’s always been there as something we’re called to do and to be – it’s just that we forget it, or put it into the too-hard basket, thinking that it’s impossible.

❖ **Think of someone you know who is holy: what makes them so?**



We are all called to be saints, St. Paul says, and we might as well get over our bourgeois fear of the name. We might also get used to recognizing the fact that there is some of the saint in all of us.

— Dorothy Day —

AZ QUOTES

THOUGHTS / QUESTIONS

Closing Worship

You might like to close each session by praying together. Here are some possible prayers.

God of the desert,
as we follow Jesus into the unknown,
may we recognise the tempter when he comes;
let it be your bread we eat,
your world we serve and you alone we worship.
this we ask through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

God, you are working still,
breaking down and building up;
open our eyes to discern your hands
so that we may take our place
as labourers together with you.
Hear this prayer for your love's sake. Amen.

God,
give us work till our life shall end,
and life till our work is done. Amen.

**E tō mātou Matua i te rangi
Kia tapu tōu Ingoa.
Kia tae mai tōu rangatiratanga.
Kia meatia tāu e pai ai
ki runga ki te whenua,
kia rite anō ki tō te rangi.
Hōmai ki a mātou āiane
he taro mā mātou mō tēnei rā.
Murua ō mātou hara,
Me mātou hoki e muru nei
i ō te hunga e hara ana ki a mātou.
Āua hoki mātou e kawea kia whakawaia;
Engari whakaorangia mātou i te kino:
Nōu hoki te rangatiratanga, te kaha, me te korōria,
Āke ake ake. Āmine.**

