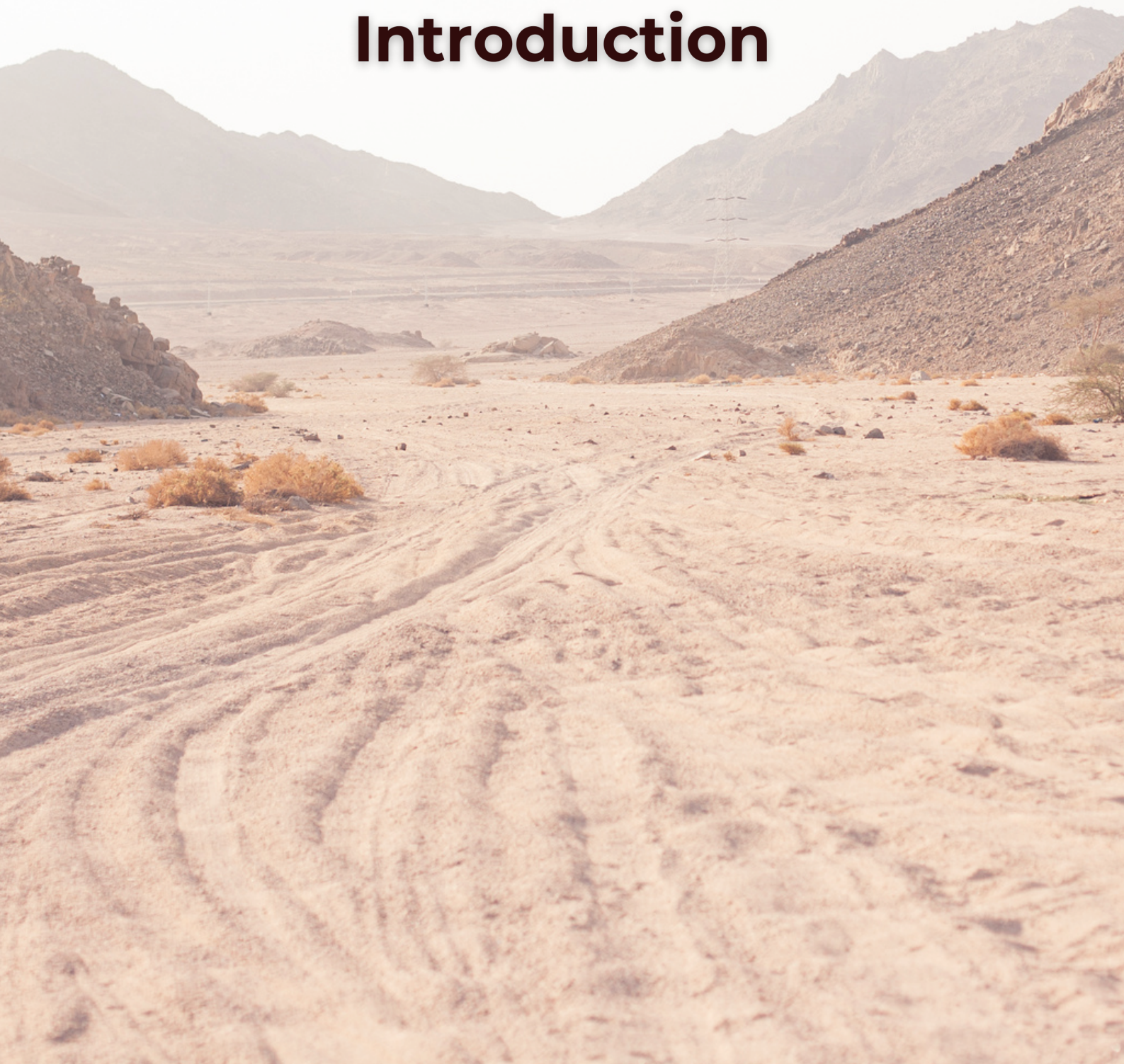


GENEROUS

LENT

Introduction



Introduction

Generous Lent: Strength for the journey

Lent is a season of self-discipline in body and soul. The traditional practice of 'giving something up for Lent', perhaps chocolate or alcohol, captures a little of the spiritual discipline of fasting which blends our physical and spiritual lives. In the rhythm of the spiritual life Lent is a season in which we learn afresh how to wait, how to discipline our natural impulses. A related Lenten discipline is to commit to something for a season: the practice of daily shared prayer, a Lent book or a small group bible study, perhaps to acts of kindness, of generosity.[1] But why choose scarcity when abundance is around us? Why choose less if we could have a little more?

[1] [40acts.org.uk/https://40acts.org.uk/](https://40acts.org.uk/)

DUST AND GLORY

The origins of Lent are shrouded in history but its roots appear to lie in the varied practices of fasting and preparation for baptism in the ancient church. By the fourth century forty days of preparation for Easter baptisms was widespread. The season was enriched by the significance of forty days in Scripture: Noah's rain (*Gen 7:17*); Moses' time on Sinai (*Ex 24:18, 34:28*); Elijah's journey to Horeb (*1 Kgs 19:8*) and, definitively, Jesus' forty days in the wilderness.

Our Christian life has a rhythm, as natural and important to our spiritual lives as the seasons of the year are to our physical and mental wellbeing. Mature discipleship is formed by the rhythm of fasting and feasting, seasons of celebration and sorrow. Lent is the season of dust and glory. The desert is a place we get serious God and where God works his grace and purpose in us.

Lent is a time for repentance, for soul-searching honesty. It is a time when we press the pause button on the busyness of life; a time rich waiting. We are not simply waiting for; impatient for Easter to arrive. In Lent we are waiting upon; creating space and time for God to speak and sustain. [1] Lent reveals our hearts to us and Lent challenges us to trust in times of scarcity.

Lent is also a time for travelling together. To be sure, Lent calls us to personal reflection and to asking the hard questions. But again, while our Lenten journey is something we do for ourselves as disciples but never by ourselves. We are part of God's people, of God's church. We stay, together, with the discipline of the desert because it's part of our discipleship journey: fasting before feasting.

[1] *The distinction of waiting for and waiting upon is an insight of Cerys in Frequencies of God: Advent with RS Thomas*

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF GENEROSITY

In Lent our goal is to be intentional about the spiritual disciplines of prayer and scripture, of self-reflection and self-discipline, a commitment to shared worship and shared life. The practice of generosity is among those core spiritual disciplines. In earlier times this was expressed as 'almsgiving', a meaning richer than we might understand today. Classically, generous giving is part of the virtuous practice of 'liberality' by which we are liberated or set free from the love of money. Beyond liberality there is the virtue of giving alms, the finest expression of 'charity' which reflects the life of God in human life. Put simply, generosity is not only what we do, it is who we are. Generous discipleship is so much richer than meeting the cost of our churches, clergy and missional ministry.

The Bible has much to say about living well and faithfully with money and possessions[1] and some of that teaching is connected with baptism and so of special interest in Lent. Luke, the Gospel with most to say about generous discipleship, notes that those baptised by John asked about life after baptism. His answer is framed by generous discipleship: sharing what we have, setting aside fraudulent greed, not extorting or accusing in hope of financial gain but rather learning the gift of contentment (*Luke 3:7-14*).

[1]There are over 2,000 bible money verses; check them out at www.compass1.org

GENEROUS LENT

Over an octave at the start of Lent, Generous Lent explores the spiritual discipline of generosity at the heart of our personal and shared discipleship. Background notes and sermon outlines are offered for two sermons suggested for the first two Sundays of Lent: the story of the Baptism and Temptation of Jesus from Matthew (slightly adapting the lectionary reading for the first Sunday in Lent) and the Feeding of the 5,000 from Mark.

In the diocese of Liverpool the invitation, Give is one of the six values in our diocesan Rule of Life: Pray Read Learn; Tell Serve Give.[1]Generous Lent is part of a suite of resources to help us engage with this spiritual discipline, as St Paul invites us to 'excel in this grace of giving' (2 Cor 8:7).

Accompanying the preaching materials is a wider suite of resources: themed liturgies for Eucharist and Service of the Word, creative Lenten prayer stations, a congregational trifold leaflet and an optional clergy letter and response form inviting a review of regular giving. These Generous Lent materials are available under the [Talking Money](#) pages of the diocese of Liverpool website.[2]



1. Encouraging his disciples not to worry Jesus gave just one piece of practical advice: give generously (*Luke 12:22-34*). A generous heart nurtures trust, drives out fear and helps make the practical decisions we must all make
2. St Paul's wisdom, rooted in scripture, his own practice and his love for his churches: we give from what we have, not what we don't have (*2 Cor 8:12; see Dt 16:17*)

[1]www.ruleoflife.org.uk

[2]Generous Lent is part of a wider resource, *Generous Seasons*, which is in preparation with material for Harvest and Advent already available

A JOURNEY INTO GENEROUS DISCIPLESHIP

The Bible speaks of the goodness of the material world, celebrated in creation and in the hymn book of Israel, especially Ps 104. The gift of a Promised Land (recognising its contested and profoundly painful nature) is painted in primary colours of rich abundance, not least in Dt 6:3-12 and 8:1-18 – the very passages which underpin Jesus' responses to the devil's temptations in Matthew 4.

The goodness of our material possessions is affirmed because they are essential for both human survival and human flourishing. Our possessions represent our 'extended self'. They are how we live in our world, always relative to the society we live in. But the Bible also affirms the gifted nature of all possessions and the ambiguity of affluence and the powerful, gravitational pull of affluence which can be spiritually dangerous:

When the Lord your God brings you into the land flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant - then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt... (Dt 6:10-12)

Our money and possessions can quickly come to represent our self-worth and our relational value. We can cluster our identity, image and reputation around what we own. Spiritually wealth and possessions carry risk. Hands full of plenty can create hearts forgetful of God. In place of gratitude there is self-congratulatory assurance: my power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me (Dt 8:17). Ultimately this gravitational pull of wealth is idolatrous because forgetting God creates a spiritual vacuum filled by other gods (Dt 8:19).[1]

It is, therefore, inconceivable that our personal and shared discipleship can fail to engage with the questions posed by the money and possessions entrusted by God to our stewardship. To be sure, from the bible we can distil practical, hands-on guidance for living well and faithfully with money.[2] But that practical guidance is framed by two primary biblical themes:

1. The primary focus is not on practical guidance around wealth but on the symbolic value which we attach to money and possessions - what these things mean or represent to us.[3] They pose the fundamental question of generous discipleship: are they gifts received with gratitude and held lightly or are they the just and entitled rewards of my own work?
2. Second, the bible is concerned with money, possessions and how we are to live well with our neighbour. The 10th commandment is key: You shall not covet. This commandment prohibits both the attitude of wanting and the action of taking what belongs to others. It underpins the prophetic challenge to injustice which is reflected through scripture.[4]

We call this gospel invitation to live well and faithfully with money and possessions a journey into generous discipleship. The imagery of a journey recognises that generous discipleship is characterised by preparation, by decisions at crossroads, will have milestones along the way. It is a journey we share with others and, like all spiritual disciplines, it is the journey of a lifetime.

So, when we preach generosity we are not simply addressing a financial problem or ticking off the annual stewardship sermon. We are seeking to grow generous disciples. If all we have is a gift then we must live and give generously. We must not appear before God empty handed (Ex 23:14-19; Dt16:16;). We must not fail to provide for the poor (Ex 22:21-29; Dt 14:28-29; 15:1-11). These commands are for our hearts and homes, our church and community (Dt 6:6-8).

[1] Paul identifies greed with idolatry (Col 3:5) whilst Jesus speaks of serving God or Mammon

[2] *Your Money and your Life: Keith Tondeur and Steve Pierce (SPCK 2010)*

[3] Luke Timothy Johnson: *Sharing Possessions (SCM1981)*. There is an accessible summary in his [2006 Lake Lecture](#)

[4] Walter Brueggemann: *Money and Possessions p17 (Westminster John Knox 2016)*