

DIVINE FRIENDSHIP



REFLECTIONS FOR LENT



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DIVINE FRIENDSHIP: Reflections for Lent

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments / 5

Introduction / 7

Ash Wednesday: A User's Guide / 9

Week of Ash Wednesday / 10

Forty Days and Forty Nights / 18

First Week of Lent / 19

So You Want to Sit at My Right / 32

Second Week of Lent / 33

The Nazareth Effect / 47

Third Week of Lent / 48

Blindness / 61

Fourth Week of Lent / 62

Before Abraham / 76

Fifth Week of Lent / 77

Gethsemane / 91

Holy Week / 92

Gone Fishing / 109

Easter Octave / 110

About the Authors / 127

INTRODUCTION

Lent is a graced time in the annual Christian calendar. The six weeks of Lent give Christians an opportunity to examine their lives and take their spiritual temperature, so to speak. Lent provides space for self-renewal. Most importantly, Lent is a time in which Christians are invited to deepen their friendship with God. Our efforts alone will not transform us. Only through a deep friendship with God can we be transformed. Friendship with God, in the person of Christ, changes everything about us. It affects the way we see ourselves, others, and the world around us. It changes what we most deeply desire. It gives us the grace to become the people God wants us to be: “fully human and fully alive,” as the words ascribed to Saint Irenaeus tell us.

This book of Lenten reflections will help you develop a deeper friendship with God over the next six weeks. Use this resource to reflect on, grow, deepen, and rediscover the wonderful gift of friendship that God offers each of us in and through Christ Jesus. The reflections serve as springboards into dialogue with God. They are “trampolines” into prayer. Ultimately, they serve as a pathway into personal conversation with God, a conversation that will lead to a deep and enduring friendship. Set aside fifteen to twenty minutes every day (or longer if you can), find a quiet space to relax, and read the scripture texts and the daily meditation. We’ve included a few questions at the end of each meditation to help you apply what you’ve read to your own life. These questions can also be used for group discussions. We have incorporated the Easter Octave into the book. Many stories in the days between Easter Sunday and the Second Sunday of Easter are filled with wonderful accounts of the Resurrection and Christ’s desire for friendship with us.

The daily scripture texts come from the Roman Catholic Lectionary. The lectionary offers three texts every weekday—one from the Old Testament, a psalm, and one Gospel text. On Sundays, the lectionary provides four texts—one from the Old Testament, a psalm, a text from the New Testament, and a

Gospel reading. The lectionary is arranged in a three-year cycle so that, over the course of those years, most of the scriptures will be read in public worship. Additionally, some lectionary texts are taken from the Apocrypha. If you are not familiar with the Apocrypha, some stories may be new to you.

This book contains the contributions of three writers. Their styles vary; some reflections use stories, some are based on personal experience, and others apply the daily scripture texts to what is going on in the world. Hopefully this diversity will also offer depth to your experience. May this Lent be, for you, one of challenge, growth, and an ever-deepening friendship with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.



Ash Wednesday A User's Guide

*In the ash a sign,
In waters new hope.
Mix together. And
Apply on forehead.*

*Remember that you,
Remember that I
Are/am dust. Repent.
Believe the good news.*

*Each time it's the same
Yearly reminder;
Sign on the forehead,
Reminder to the soul.*

*Remember that I,
Remember that you
Am/are dust. Repent.
Believe the good news.*

—Anthony Egan, SJ





Ash Wednesday



Read Joel 2:12-18; Psalm 51; 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2;
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18.

Lent is a time for renewing our friendship with God. In the busyness of our lives, our relationship with God can fray like the ends of a rope. Friendships can lose their momentum when we become engrossed in the grind of daily life and don't make time to hang out with friends. This can also happen in our relationship with God. During Lent, Jesus invites us into a renewed friendship. He invites us to "catch up" on the things that have happened in our lives that we have not told him about. Today, specifically, Jesus invites us to put God at the center of our lives. He knows that in doing so we will reclaim our true identity as beloved sons and daughters of a God who deeply desires friendship with us.

Notice how difficult this can be for us. Often, we focus on the external parts of our lives and trick ourselves into believing that others' perceptions of us matter a great deal. We desperately want others to notice us because we feel good or worthwhile when they do. We seek others' approval to feel validated and valued. In the Gospel reading today, Jesus reminds us that our true value is realized only in our friendship with God. God has created and gifted each of us, and, through friendship with God alone, our deepest yearnings will be satisfied.

The season of Lent—if we open ourselves to grace—can lead us into an ever-deepening relationship with God. Lent invites us to explore the attitudes, hurts, grudges, past situations, past relationships, addictions, and so on that have filled our lives and prevented us from deepening our relationship with God. Sometimes these things occupy valuable space in our lives and prevent us from moving forward. Jesus wants to help us bring them before God so that we can let them go and, in so doing, reenter the place of truth where we reclaim our identity.

The ashes that pastors distribute today remind us of our fragility and, paradoxically, our great value. God sent Jesus to live on this earth; God became

one of us. The great mystery of God becoming one of us is God's way of showing us just how much God desires our friendship. We experience the life and love God offers us when we open our hearts to a friendship without pretense or secrets. This sacred time is an invitation to a renewed friendship with the God who loves us—no matter who we are, where we come from, or what we have done or failed to do. Let's embrace the season of Lent as a time to rekindle our relationship with God.

- In what ways has your friendship with God become “frayed”?
- What negative habits, beliefs, or insecurities occupy valuable space in your life?
- What will you need to let go of in order to put God at the center of your life?

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Read Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1;
Luke 9:22-25.

Deuteronomy puts a sobering choice before us: life or death? Moses tells the people of Israel what leads to life and what leads to death. We sense Moses' urgency when he declares to the Israelites, "You shall not live long" (Deut. 30:18), indicating that their attention is needed now. Moses describes the meaning of life: living in the love of God, obeying God's commandments, clinging to God, and dwelling in the Promised Land. Today, we find our Promised Land in a relationship of deep friendship with God. In the Gospel reading, that sense of urgency continues. Jesus invites us to take up our cross and follow him. Notice how Jesus invites us in the context of his own suffering. Right from the start, Jesus puts his cards on the table; there is no small print we can claim we did not see. He invites us to follow him but also warns us of the consequences for being his disciples: We may lose our very selves.

The call to discipleship is not easy. Following Jesus involves challenges. Discipleship is about renouncing what distracts us from giving God our full attention so that we can embrace more fully the life God offers us in and through Jesus. It is hard for people of faith to live the values of God's kingdom in a world where so much seems to be contrary to those values and, at times, even ridicules them. The world says, "Make a name for yourself! Be somebody! Why choose to befriend and follow a man who gets himself nailed to a cross? How does death display power and strength?" At first glance, Jesus' call to discipleship does not seem beneficial. But when we look closer, we realize that Jesus invites us to life in abundance—to love, happiness, obedience, and resurrection. We are not masochists, aiming to suffer and die; we are friends with a man who will lead us to all we deeply desire. And this life that Jesus calls us to may not be easy. But Jesus never promises us an easy life; he promises us the fullness of life.

Another way of looking at the call of the scripture readings today is to realize that Jesus invites us to get our priorities right. In the humdrum of daily life, our priorities can get out of sync. How easily do we become slaves (not disciples) of trends and what the world considers valuable? Lent reminds us of the most important choice we have to make: life or death? We choose life when we make a conscious, daily decision to follow Jesus, to make his vision our vision, to make his pattern of life our pattern of life. This means following him to the cross, but it also means rising with him to new life. The only way to abundant life is through friendship with Jesus and a convicted discipleship. Only we have the power to make the decision of “life or death” for ourselves.

- What does it look like to take up your cross and follow Jesus?
- What do you need to renounce in order to choose life?
- How can you make Jesus a priority in your life?

Friday after Ash Wednesday

Read Isaiah 58:1-9; Psalm 51;
Matthew 9:14-15.

Friendship is a two-way street; it requires give and take for each person in the relationship. In today's readings, the prophet Isaiah asks us to fast, and the psalmist implores God for pardon with prayer and supplication. But this fasting and prayer are useless without a focus or a reason for devotion. If we choose to fast—or give up a food or some other activity—during Lent, we do so to make a special place for God. The importance of our fasting lies not only in the physical action of renouncing something but also in the deeper sense and awareness of who we are making space for in our lives.

In addition to fasting, the prophet Isaiah lists other actions we can take—actions the prophet knows are important to God. Isaiah encourages us to notice the plight of the oppressed, the hungry, the homeless, and the naked. Our friend, God, cares deeply for these people—just as God cares deeply for us. If we can find a way of reaching out to those whom Isaiah lists, we will be doing the very work that builds a deep and enduring friendship with God. An awareness of the plight of others offers us perspective. When we notice the poor, homeless, or hungry, we are presented not only with an opportunity to reach out but also with an opportunity to thank God for what we have. How often do we spend our time wanting more and failing to appreciate what we already have? Our ability to exhibit gratitude does exactly what the prophet suggests: makes us people of integrity.

Our fasting, prayer, and awareness of those in need of food, shelter, and justice during Lent will lead us to a deeper awareness of God and of what is really important to us. It gives us a focus not only during Lent but also for our entire life. May we look past ourselves and focus on deepening our friendship with the Lord.

- How can you increase your awareness of those in need of food, shelter, clothing, and justice?
- What can you do to regain a sense of balance and focus this Lent?
- For what are you most grateful today?

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

Read Isaiah 58:9-14; Psalm 86;
Luke 5:27-32.

Jesus says to Levi, a tax collector, “Follow me.” Levi leaves everything and follows Jesus immediately and then throws a party for him. The party gets tense when the Pharisees and their scribes question Jesus for spending time with “sinners.” They know that Levi’s life and profession are messy and, according to their standards, unclean. But this does not stop Jesus from wanting a relationship with Levi. Jesus knows that our lives are messy. He knows about the issues that drag us down and hold us back from becoming the kind of people God wants us to be. Even so, Jesus says to us, “Follow me,” believing that we possess the gifts and potential to be his followers.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us of these gifts. We have the ability—and the duty—to help those around us who are oppressed, to be light in the darkness by our words and actions, to be like springs of water that never run dry. Since God gave us these gifts, God knows we are capable of using them. But what if, like Levi, we have been told that we are sinners and unclean? Perhaps we have found ourselves in situations where we made the wrong choice, where we failed to live out God’s call for our lives. We may feel embarrassed by the things we have done, the experiences that we have lived through—some of our own making and some not—so we spend vast amounts of energy trying to keep the chaos of our lives hidden. We know that our lives aren’t perfect, but we try to project an image of perfection anyway. This pretense and pretending can lead to deep sadness and isolation.

Today, Jesus reminds us that he wants a relationship with us even amid the mess of our lives. He sees our mess and still chooses to say, “Follow me.” He does not come to call the virtuous but rather those with messy lives—people like us. We needn’t wait until our lives are “perfect” to answer Jesus’ call. He wants us to follow him as we are right now. Jesus will be our physician. All we

need is the desire and willingness to respond as Levi did, and Jesus will lead us to a new life.

- What messiness in your life is holding you back from accepting Jesus' invitation to follow him?
- What God-given gifts do you possess that can be used to improve the lives of others?
- What do Jesus' words "Follow me" mean for you today?



Forty Days and Forty Nights

*After forty days and forty nights
Satan filled with glee
Thought he had three bites—
Bread, power, and recognition.*

*And you resist
Because you insist
That to God alone belongs
Bread, power, and recognition.*

*Every day and every night,
O God, Satan tries to bite.*

*Give me courage to resist
Simply because you insist
That I belong to thee!*

—Russell Pollitt, SJ



First Sunday of Lent

Read Deuteronomy 26:4-10; Psalm 91; Romans 10:8-13;
Luke 4:1-13.

Let's be honest: We don't like to talk about our temptations. Very few people know us as tempted human beings. From the outside, our lives may seem free of any kind of inner conflict. The reality, as we know, is the complete opposite. All of us have evil thoughts, selfish ambitions, or dark passions that threaten to undermine our friendship with God and with one another. These experiences are part and parcel of our spiritual journey, yet we struggle to talk openly about them. But Jesus handles temptation in a different way. His own spiritual journey begins with the Spirit leading him into the desert to be tempted by the evil one. And we only know about these forty days of temptation in the wilderness because Jesus chooses to share his experiences with his closest friends. As a result, we know that our risen Savior was a tempted human being.

Jesus' experience in the wilderness reminds us that temptation is not a sin. Additionally, Jesus is not surprised or shocked by our temptations. However sinful they may seem to us, he knows how it feels to be tempted. Admitting our temptations to Jesus may be the most difficult part of our spiritual journey. We would rather see ourselves as virtuous and good, but this denial is not helpful to us in the long run. When we refuse to admit our temptations—our jealousy, our greed, our cowardice, and so on—our shame and guilt can cause us misery. Instead, let's share our temptations with Jesus—and perhaps also with a trusted friend, mentor, or counselor—so that he will provide us with the grace we need to overcome.

- What temptations are you facing today?
- Admit your temptations to Jesus and then listen. What do you hear Jesus saying to you?
- After you listen for Jesus' grace, pray the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner."