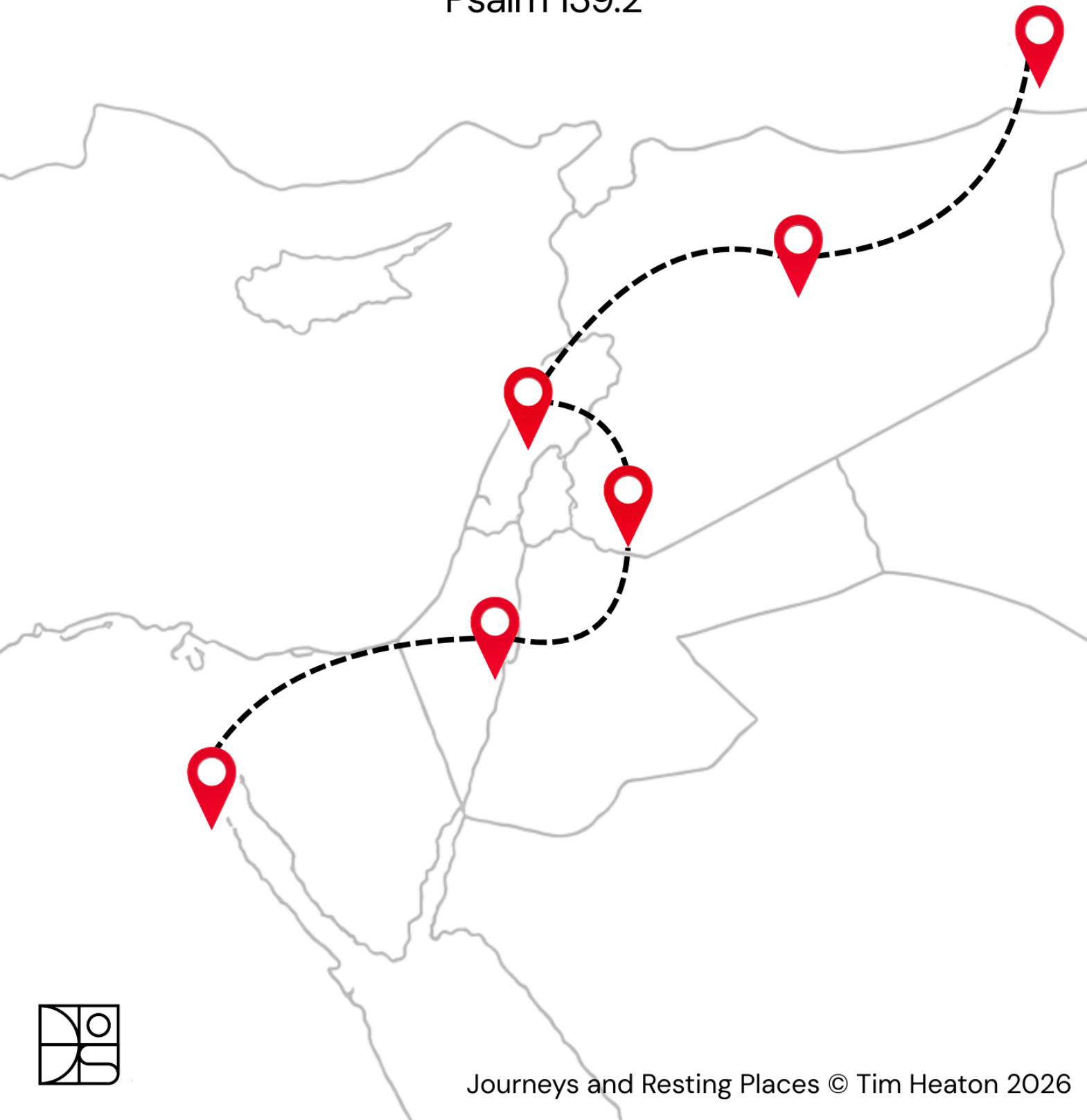


JOURNEYS AND RESTING PLACES

"You mark out my journeys and my resting place and are
acquainted with all my ways."

Psalm 139:2



Week 1: Introduction

If you're in a group, spend a few moments getting to know each other.

Begin each week's session by saying together The Lord's Prayer. This is a Bible study course for all abilities, from bishops to seekers. I won't have got the balance completely right, please forgive me, but I hope that one way or another it will enhance your experience of Easter when the great day finally arrives.

Make sure you've got a cup of tea or coffee and have some fun. Don't confuse Bible study with penance — enjoy yourself!

Journey

Let's go on a journey. It's a journey through Lent from Ash Wednesday to Easter Eve, from wherever you are now to a tomb in a garden. Every journey is an act of travelling from one place to another. It may be a physical, bodily movement, or it might be an emotional or spiritual journey as we go through a particular time in our lives, for better or worse. A priest may talk about her journey to ordination, or someone who has recovered from a long illness might say, "It's been quite a journey."

A journey may be short – the word itself is derived from the French word *jour*, suggesting a day's travel – or it may involve movement over a considerable distance. Life itself is a journey from cradle to grave and beyond. It's a journey from God and to God, who is the source of our lives and the goal of our lives, the beginning and the end of all created things, the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last.

As we travel together on this figurative journey through the six weeks of Lent, we'll be following five physical journeys made by people whose stories are told in the Bible. The theme of journeying is an ancient one in the Church and provides a reason for the practice of pilgrimage. Like the story of salvation itself, which has always been told in the context of a deep emptiness and yearning, pilgrimage stems from an aching and longing to be nearer to God. The physical act of movement is seen to aid an inward journey of closer encounter with God; it is a journey of inner transformation that brings us nearer to our true home.

In each week's session three questions are offered. If you're doing the course in a group, take your time and let everyone have a chance to say something if they wish to. If you spend 10–15 minutes on each question, taking the rest of the material gently and raising your own questions as you go along, each session should last between 1 and 1½ hours. And remember, there are no right or wrong answers!

Just a word about group discussions: make the group a safe place to be open and honest with each other. Speaking from experience will always be more valuable than speaking in a purely theoretical way but remember that things said in the group should be kept within the group. Respect confidentiality and remember that the things you hear are for your ears only.

Please note, all Bible excerpts are from the NRSV translation but feel free to read along with your Bible of preference. The excerpts have a light green box around them, for ease of distinguishing text from scripture.



Question 1

Have you ever been on a pilgrimage? Or an epic journey, real or figurative, physical, emotional or spiritual?

Pilgrimage is a metaphor for life: an unsafe path towards our eternal home. Being “on the way” or “passing through” says something profound about a fundamental condition of human existence.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going... For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God... [Abraham and Sarah] confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had the opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.
Hebrews 11:8, 10, 13–16

Our personal journey through life can be likened to a literal pilgrimage to a sacred place, on which we encounter many joys and hardships, highs and lows, along the way. In days gone by, pilgrims arriving at Salisbury Cathedral – or any other – after a journey of many days or weeks on foot would have understood their arrival, as they entered through the Great West Doors, to be a metaphor for reaching heaven, the conclusion of the pilgrim’s life and union with God. Life is a journey crowned with a goal, and life as a pathway ends with the culminating experience of being united with God.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.
2 Timothy 4:7–8

Question 2

When you have finished the race and received the crown, what do you think “heaven” will be like?

Notwithstanding all the joys and benefits of arrival, many of the rewards of a pilgrimage are to be found not only at the destination itself but on the road getting there, not least the kindness of strangers. There are many blessings to be counted, and when our hope of arrival is fulfilled we are likely to be giving thanks not only for the completion of the journey and the realisation of our goal, but also for what we have received along the way. My prayer is that this will be the reality for you on this journey through Lent, especially if you are doing the course with others as part of a group.

The journeys we shall be following over the next five weeks are:

Week 2: The journey from Haran to Canaan

Week 3: The journey from Canaan to Egypt

Week 4: The journey from Egypt to the Promised Land

Week 5: The journey from Galilee to Jerusalem

Week 6: The journey from the gates of the Holy City to Golgotha



What links these journeys together is the story of salvation. As we consider during Lent – especially in Holy Week – Christ’s saving work on the cross, we discover that the biblical concept of salvation is deeply rooted in the exodus from Egypt. “What’s past is prologue,” Shakespeare wrote in *The Tempest*, suggesting that history provides context for the future, shapes it and gives it meaning. God’s liberation of the Hebrew slaves was the first defining episode in salvation history: God acted decisively to free his chosen people, leading them out of captivity and forming them into a holy nation from which one day would be raised a Saviour for the whole world.

The New Testament draws repeatedly on details of the exodus, with images of salvation in Christ frequently linked to the motif of freedom from slavery and oppression. Salvation suggests deliverance, liberation, release, restoration and homecoming, powerful images of redemption firmly rooted in the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. This is the backdrop of history that points forward to a cross behind which stands a tomb that is empty.

Resting place

On any journey there will be resting places – stops along the way as well as steps along the way! There will be tea stops, meal breaks and overnight stays. There will be longer periods of rest between stages of a journey, or an extended rest before beginning another journey. And then, when our journeying is over, we come to our final resting place.

Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried.”
Ruth 1:16–17

Question 3

Where would you like your final resting place on Earth to be?

Prayer:

God of our journeys,
bless the paths we travel,
the companions we meet
and the silences we keep.
Guide and direct our footsteps
and keep us from all dangers along the way.
May each step become a prayer,
a movement towards your heart,
that leads us deeper into your presence.
And, when the journey ends,
may we find that you were both the path and the home
we sought all along.
Amen.



Week 2: The journey from Haran to Canaan

Journey

Our first journey begins in Haran in modern-day Turkey, close to the Syrian border. It was to here that Abraham and his wife Sarah (originally Abram and Sarai) had previously travelled from Ur in ancient Mesopotamia, a journey of 600 miles. Led by Abraham's father Terah, and accompanied by Abraham's nephew Lot, they settled in Haran.

It was in Haran, following his father's death, that Abraham received the call from God to set out on another journey to an unnamed place. As such, with the exact goal unspecified, it becomes a test of faith and trust in God that ultimately leads to the birth of Israel as a nation, the Levitical priesthood and the Messiah himself. Matthew's gospel opens with the words: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." The call of Abraham initiates the birth of a people and a holy nation who will one day come to inhabit a land of promise. Abraham and Sarah were the first ancestors of Israel to settle in Canaan, and the covenant and blessing granted to them by God's free choice will be inherited by their successors through faith.

If your church follows the Common Worship lectionary you might well have heard the call of Abraham in church on Sunday. It marks the beginning of God's salvation history, which finds its completion and fulfilment in Jesus:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.
Genesis 12:1-4a

Abraham's obedience was immediate and unquestioning. He was 75 when he, Sarah and Lot set out on the road to Canaan, 400 miles to the south. They arrived first at Shechem, where Abraham built an altar to the Lord. From there they moved on southwards and settled near Bethel, where again he built an altar to the Lord. And there:

The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you."
Genesis 13:14-17



In obedience to God's command, Abraham and Sarah moved southwards again and settled by the oaks of Mamre at Hebron, where once more they set up an altar to the Lord. We gain a sense here of a nomadic life, the life of "strangers and foreigners seeking a homeland" (Hebrews 11:13-14), of travellers who were not so much pilgrims as sojourners, staying for a while in various places among the indigenous peoples who regarded them as resident migrants. We can see, too, how Abraham and Sarah's faith was shown by taking steps to appropriate the divine land-grant by symbolic religious acts – building altars – and demonstrating a clear monotheism in contrast the polytheism of their ancestors and to amid the idolatry of the other inhabitants of the land. The hill country from Shechem to Hebron, covering some 50 miles north to south, would comprise the core of later Israelite settlement.

Question 1

Do you think that the biblical promise is sufficient grounds for the state of Israel's political sovereignty and authority over the land since 1948?

The divine covenant also promised to Abraham and Sarah a family and nations as successors. When he was 86, Abraham had a son, Ishmael, by an Egyptian concubine, Hagar, given to him by Sarah. Later, when he was 99 and Sarah 90, God changed their names from Abram and Sarai, and the covenant-promise of family and nation was confirmed at Mamre:

God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her... your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year."

Genesis 17:15-16, 19-21

The following year, when Abraham was 100 – and despite Sarah's profound disbelief – Isaac was born.

The greatest test of Abraham's faith came when God ordered him to sacrifice Isaac on a mountain in Moriah (the site of future Jerusalem, later identified with Mount Zion/Temple Mount itself). Not only was this a supreme trial in terms of the brutal act itself but, from the viewpoint of succession, Isaac was, humanly speaking, the only means by which the divine promises given to Abraham and Sarah could be fulfilled. Abraham obeyed, though his hand was stayed at the last moment when a ram was provided as a substitute.

There is no room to tell the story here. You probably know it well enough already but do read it again (Genesis 22) if you'd like to. As Christians we see many parallels to the sacrifice that God made in Christ: a loving father called to sacrifice his son; Abraham giving Isaac the wood to carry for the fire just as Jesus carried the wood of his cross; a journey that took three days, mirroring Jesus' journey from death to life in three days. Perhaps Abraham thought that if he went through with it God would raise Isaac from the dead (as suggested by Hebrews 11:19), so prefiguring not only Christ's death but also his resurrection.



God's test was not in earnest, though Abraham did not know this. His obedience was unquestioning and the miraculous appearance of a ram as a substitute for Isaac vindicated his faith. The key factor, then, was God's provision: "God himself will provide a burnt offering," Abraham assures his son (Genesis 22:8). God is at work in the world in decisive ways. All that we require will be provided. God plans, thinks, works and acts ahead to ensure that everything we need is supplied.

Question 2

Has God allowed you to go through a period of testing, by which he has refined or clarified your character or actions?

Resting place

After one last move southwards to Beer-sheba, Sarah died at the age of 127 and was buried at Machpelah, in a cave in a field surrounded by land that Abraham had purchased from Ephron, a Hittite, for 400 shekels of silver. It lay east of Mamre in the district of Hebron. When Abraham died aged 175, having lived for a hundred years in the land of Canaan and after having given everything he had to Isaac, he was laid to rest there, too. Here also were later buried Isaac, his wife Rebekah and their son Jacob, who was given by God the name Israel.

The landscape of the modern city of Hebron is still dominated by the tombs of the patriarchs and matriarchs, a site guarded by massive stone walls and for centuries a place of prayer venerated by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. Our common ancestor is Abraham. As a great prophet and recipient of the divine covenant, Abraham plays a unique role in all three traditions.

Question 3

These three "Abrahamic faiths" as they are known – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – share a belief in the same God, the one true God, the God of Abraham. How can they be brought closer today?

Prayer:

God of Abraham and Sarah,
who called them away from the familiar and the known,
teach us to walk with the same courage,
trusting your promise even when the road is unclear.
Shape us as you shaped them,
people of hope and people of blessing,
so that through our lives
others may glimpse your kindness.
Lead us from what we have known
into the fullness of what you are preparing,
and as you walked with Abraham and Sarah
walk with us, now and always.
Amen.



Week 3: The journey from Canaan to Egypt

Journey

Abraham and Sarah begat Isaac; Isaac and Rebekah begat Jacob (and, let's not forget, Esau, the firstborn, whose right of succession Jacob usurped); and Jacob — well, Jacob begat quite a number of descendants from two wives, Leah and Rachel, and two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah. Altogether there was one girl, Dinah, and twelve boys. Rachel, Jacob's second wife, was the mother of his two youngest sons, Joseph and Benjamin. Joseph, whose journey we turn to this week, was Jacob's favourite son, the first born to Rachel who was his favourite wife.

It's the story of a spoilt boy sold into Egyptian slavery by jealous brothers who makes good in adversity, and from an unjust imprisonment rises to the highest offices of state in the land. Though, by wise planning he averts the scourge of famine in the country, a famine that reaches Canaan and forces his family to Egypt. He thereby saves his family, God's chosen people, from starvation, and is eventually reconciled with his brothers who settle in Egypt. It is a crucial episode in God's salvation history, for without it there would be no exodus from Egypt, no Moses, no wilderness years, no reoccupation of the land of promise.

Jacob's special affection for Joseph was marked by a particularly famous coat:

Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves [*a coat of many colours in other Bible translations*]. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.
Genesis 37:3–4

Question 1

Favouritism becomes the root of conflict: do you recognise anything like this from your own experience?

The other thing that many people know about Joseph is that he was a dreamer and interpreter of dreams — probably thanks in no small part to the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. From an early age Joseph dreamed of greatness; he dreamed that he was superior to his brothers and for this they hated him even more. So one day, when Joseph had been sent by his father to see how his brothers were getting on with the flocks at Shechem (the place where Abraham and Sarah had first arrived in Canaan) they plotted to kill him. At the suggestion of Reuben — who secretly hoped to rescue him later — they threw him into a pit. A caravan of Ishmaelite merchants on the way to Egypt then appeared on the horizon and, with Reuben absent, the brothers saw a way of not only getting rid of Joseph but also profiting from it. They sold him to the Ishmaelite traders for twenty pieces of silver and they carried him off to Egypt.



Joseph was purchased from the Ishmaelites by Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard, who appointed him as his steward. This is the moment when another journey begins for Joseph, an extraordinary journey of achievement and progress, guided by God, from penniless slave to powerful governor of Egypt.

The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master [Potiphar]. His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. So Joseph found favour in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. Genesis 39:2-4

But it wasn't all plain sailing. When Joseph received improper advances from Potiphar's wife he rebuffed her, and out of spite she then accused him of showing unwanted affection towards her. Joseph was thrown into prison, later to be joined by Pharaoh's butler and baker who had also fallen from favour. They both told Joseph about dreams they had had and Joseph correctly interpreted them. Two years later, Pharaoh himself had two dreams and the butler remembered Joseph and told Pharaoh about him. Pharaoh sent for Joseph, described to him the dreams and asked for an interpretation.

"It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. After them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; the famine will consume the land... And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about." Genesis 41:28-30, 32

Notice how it is God who brings about the famine; the God who controls the forces of nature can also withdraw the fruits of nature. This is all part of a divinely orchestrated plan to elevate Joseph: it becomes part of God's larger plan of deliverance and sets the stage for the exodus when God will lead his covenant people to the place where he will form them into a holy nation.

Question 2

Have you ever had a dream that portended a future event? Has God ever spoken to you in a dream?

Joseph suggested to Pharaoh that food supplies be kept back during the years of plenty to provide for the nation during the famine. His practical approach, which Pharaoh credited to the spirit of God working in Joseph, impressed Pharaoh so much that he made him chief overseer of Egypt to carry out his recommended plan.

When the famine came, Joseph opened up the storehouses. But the famine was not confined to Egypt and had spread to neighbouring countries. In Canaan, Jacob sent his sons – all but Benjamin who, with Joseph gone, was now his favourite – to Egypt to buy grain. When Joseph saw his ten brothers he recognized them, and also noticed that his younger brother Benjamin, his only full brother, was not with them. They did not recognize him. Pretending not to know them, Joseph accused them of being spies and imprisoned them, making them relive his own fear and helplessness when they sold him into slavery. But Joseph neither wished their death nor would he behave unjustly: after three days he released them and sent them back to Canaan with their donkeys loaded with sacks of grain, keeping Simeon as a hostage until they returned with his beloved brother Benjamin – this supposedly being a test for them to prove they were not spies.



In due time they return with Benjamin, and Joseph makes himself known to his brothers. What follows is an emotional scene of reconciliation and forgiveness in which Joseph reveals the divine providence of God:

He said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God."

Genesis 45.4-8

The "remnant on earth" (v. 7) will live on because of Joseph. There is a world-historical dimension to this family saga, which ends with Pharaoh inviting Joseph's whole family – Jacob and all his children and grandchildren – to settle in Egypt. They were assigned the pastures of Goshen in the eastern Nile Delta, a region suited to sheep grazing, and here the Israelites settled in security. It remained the home of the Hebrews for 430 years until the exodus.

Question 3

Do you believe in predestination, the idea that everything has been decided or planned in advance by God?

Resting place

When Jacob died aged 147 he was taken back to Canaan and buried in the cave at Machpelah with his parents and grandparents. Joseph died when he was 110 years old and was buried in Egypt. But he knew that God would one day return his people to Canaan, and before he died he extracted a promise from his brothers that they would bring his bones from Egypt, which was fulfilled in the exodus. Joseph was eventually laid to rest at Shechem, the place where his brothers had sold him to the Ishmaelites. He was blessed as the progenitor of two of the twelve tribes of Israel through his sons Manasseh and Ephraim, born to his Egyptian wife, Asenath.

Prayer:

God of our destiny,
we remember today your servant Joseph,
who was taken into slavery with chains on his wrists
yet carried your promises forever in his heart.
When our path is dark and unfair,
help us to trust you as Joseph did,
knowing that no pit is too deep and no betrayal too great
for your redeeming hand.
Shape us through our trials,
that we may rise with humility and wisdom,
and turn our hardships into testimonies of your goodness
and blessing to all around us — even those who hurt us the most.
Amen.



Week 4: The journey from Egypt to the Promised Land

Journey

Long after the propitious times of Joseph's governorship there arose some disquiet among the Egyptians at the great numerical increase of the Israelites. To counteract what was considered to be a growing menace, the Hebrews were subjected to forced labour under Egyptian taskmasters. This allowed them to be kept under strict observation and control whilst at the same time meeting a need for a large labour force. Finally, an attempt was made to check any further increase in the Hebrew population by an edict that all newborn baby boys should be thrown into the Nile.

God heard the cries of his people and commissioned Moses to lead them out of Egypt. They were called out of Egypt to become a nation, to serve God and live out a covenant with God. This was no mere liberation of the oppressed: it was a divine calling to a high destiny. Repeatedly in later generations, the prophets, exhorting Israel to return to her God, hark back to this exodus. It was God's redeeming grace that had summoned a nation from Egyptian bondage into the Promised Land for his service, in fulfilment of the promises made to their ancestors. For the prophets, this great redemption was ever to be remembered with gratitude and a response of obedience.

The book of Exodus records the two great climaxes of Israel's history: the deliverance from Egypt and the giving of the law. Henceforth, the events of the exodus would hold a central place in God's revelation of himself to his people, not only in the old covenant but also in the new, in which the Passover lamb prefigures our Lord's sacrifice and the Passover feast comes to serve as the commemoration of our salvation.

The lectionary readings for Mothering Sunday include the story of the birth of Moses and his miraculous survival in the face of the prevailing infanticide of all Hebrew newborn males:

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said.

Exodus 2:1-6

Moses' sister, Miriam, who had watched from a distance (v. 4) bravely offered to find a nurse for the child – in fact, his mother – and so Moses' life was saved. When weaned, he was handed back to Pharaoh's daughter and grew to adulthood in the Egyptian court, the second great Jewish figure to find his way into Egyptian court society.



Moses, unsurprisingly, felt for his enslaved people and, after killing an Egyptian overseer who he had seen beating one of the Hebrew slaves, fled over the border to Midian. Here he had his famous encounter with God through the wonder of the burning-but-not-consumed bush, where he was called to intercede with Yahweh and bring God's people out of Egypt. When Moses protested that he was "slow of speech and slow of tongue" (Exodus 4:10), God directed that Moses' older brother Aaron should act as his spokesman to the Israelites and to Pharaoh.

Question 1

Given Moses' lack of eloquence, why do you think God chose him to be his prophet to Israel?

Moses and Aaron appealed to Pharaoh to let God's people go. Pharaoh refused, and in doing so unleashed the ten plagues upon Egypt. God's power was demonstrated to Pharaoh and his people in a series of ten judgements that portrayed clearly the reality and power of Israel's God — and by contrast the impotence of Egypt's gods. The first nine plagues, relating directly to natural phenomena in the Nile Valley, demonstrated God's full control over nature. As Moses announced each successive plague, God brought them to pass in invincible sequence and growing severity, just as Pharaoh ever more persistently refused to acknowledge Israel's God in face of the clearest possible evidence of his authority and power. Accordingly, the tenth plague, the death of every firstborn in the land of Egypt, did not come without warning: Pharaoh had been given every opportunity to acknowledge God and obey his bidding, and so had to take full responsibility for the consequences of his refusal.

Question 2

Many people will struggle to recognize in all of this the loving, compassionate, forgiving God we know in Jesus. How can God's actions here be justified?

Only the Israelites would be saved, for God said to Moses:

"Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household... You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it... For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt."
Exodus 12:3, 6-7, 12-13

"I will pass over you" (v. 13) are the key words here, giving meaning to what became known as the Passover. With his own firstborn now dead, Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron in the night and said, "Be gone!" The Israelites took their dough before it was leavened and left immediately, somewhere — it is reckoned — in the order of two million men, women and children, with all their flocks and herds. The plagues were the response of a just God to deep injustices, proving that God takes oppression seriously and acts to save his people. It was God's actions that freed the Israelites from slavery under Pharaoh, and the ten plagues were an essential precursor to this exodus. These events paved the way for the release of the Israelites and the beginning of their formation and identity as God's holy nation.



Israel's story is not simply a story about deliverance but a testimony to God as deliverer; it is not only about liberation but about God as the liberator. The road out was paved by God.

Crossing the Re(e)d Sea the Israelites reached Mount Sinai, where Moses received the two tablets of the law, the foundation of their subsequent role as the people of God. The covenant was a two-way agreement, emphasising mutual commitment and faithfulness: "You will be my people and I will be your God" (Exodus 6:7). It was a contract immediately violated when Aaron made a golden calf and the people worshipped it. But God is a forgiving God: the people's idolatry was quickly pardoned and the covenant-law renewed. Nevertheless, the Promised Land never became a reality for those who had left Egypt under Moses: upon reaching Canaan, Moses sent in spies who returned with reports that the people were strong and their towns well-fortified. At this news, faithless Israel rebelled in fear and God decreed that they should wander in the wilderness for forty years. Everyone 20 years old and upward in the Sinai census would die in the wilderness, except for Caleb and Joshua who alone had shown faith in God's promises and trust in his power to save. Even Moses and Aaron would never enter the land of promise because of their blasphemy at the waters of Meribah (Numbers 20).

Question 3

Why should the Promised Land be so elusive? Does the wilderness of wandering symbolise anything for you?

Resting place

Moses ascended Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to view the land he was destined never to enter, the land that God had given to Abraham and Sarah and their offspring forever. He died in Moab at the age of 120 and was buried in a valley, the actual place of his burial unknown.

On the eve of his assassination in Memphis, Tennessee, on 3rd April 1968, Martin Luther King Jr., the champion of racial justice during the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, proclaimed: "I've been to the mountaintop... And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Prayer:

Almighty God,
you hear the cries of the oppressed
and see the suffering of your people;
as you called Moses to lead your children out of bondage,
we remember that you are still a God who delivers.
Lead us, Lord, out of every place of captivity,
from the sin that binds us, the fears that enslave us,
the wounds that keep us from walking fully with you.
When the road before us seems impossible,
teach us to trust in your power and your promises;
guide us by your Spirit and your Word,
and give us faith to step forward in obedience.
Amen.



Week 5: The journey from Galilee to Jerusalem

Journey

It's Passiontide. The mood of Lent darkens as we begin to anticipate Christ's suffering and death, and now we join Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. We know this was always to be his destination and his destiny, but a particular verse in Luke's gospel marks a tipping point, a critical moment in Jesus' life and ministry when he embarks on his prophetic mission: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). He sets out resolutely, steadfastly, with resolve and determination. From this moment onwards he is on the way to the cross and there is no looking back.

Jesus, the traveller-on-the-road, calls us to journey with him to the sacred place. We are on the way with him, on the road to salvation, the way that leads to life. We know from the Acts of the Apostles that the Way was the name by which the Christian Church was first known: followers of Christ "belonged to the Way" (Acts 9:2) and it was not until the founding of the church at Antioch in Syria that they came to be known as Christians (Acts 11:26). We know, too, that Jesus not only shows us the way and leads us in the way but is the way: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Jesus is the road we travel and our resting place.

Just before Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem a very significant event had occurred on an unnamed mountaintop:

Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem... Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"— not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

Luke 9:28–31, 33–35

The Transfiguration marks an important stage in the revelation of Jesus as the Christ and Son of God. It takes place about a week after Peter's confession of the Messiahship of Jesus and of Jesus' first passion prediction (Luke 9:18–22). Here on the mountain his glory is revealed, not through his deeds but in a more personal way, in an experience that reminds us of his baptism. It is a manifestation of the divine glory, the very presence of God in the midst of his people. Moses and Elijah represent the law and the prophets respectively. They are witnessing to the Messiah and being fulfilled and superseded by him: the disciples are instructed, "listen to *him*!" (v.35). We're told that the subject of the conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah was Jesus' "departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (v. 31).



The Greek word used here for departure is *exodos*, literally “the road out”. It alludes not only to his crucifixion but also to his resurrection and ascension, the three great events that will take place in Jerusalem and together are the means of our redemption. It is a salvation prefigured by the Old Testament exodus from Egypt, and Peter’s desire to make three dwelling points to the Feast of Booths, the annual harvest festival commemorating that great deliverance.

Question 1

In what ways might we describe Jesus as the “new Moses” and the “new Elijah”?

As we travel further along the road to Jerusalem we discover that it becomes symbolic of discipleship. Faith itself is a journey, never a completed state, as we seek to grow in our discipleship of Jesus and become more Christlike every step of the way.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Luke 9:57–62

These would-be followers of Jesus have their understanding of discipleship seriously challenged: the follower must be like the one who is followed. To be called to follow Jesus is to be summoned to a life in which all the world’s priorities of comfort and security are tested. The irony is that while creatures of the field and sky have somewhere to live, the Son of Man, who is Lord of all creation, is a wanderer with no place called home. There is a place provided by nature for animals but the Son of Man has nowhere to live. The clear implication is that if Jesus has no place to call home then neither will those who seek to follow him. This sounds harsh on our ears today but it stands in scripture as an indication of the radical demands of discipleship: the call to follow Jesus must be set above every other care, whether for self or family — even for the dead (v. 60).

Question 2

How do you react to this? Isn’t it enough to give Jesus a place in your heart? What good things might result from that?

Jesus’ fate is inexorably linked to Jerusalem: Jerusalem is to be the locus of the events that are to come and nowhere else. It is part and parcel of God’s plan, something that cannot be avoided.

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.’ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

Luke 13:31–34



Herod, tetrarch of Galilee, wants to kill Jesus. He undoubtedly could, just as he had commanded the death of John the Baptist, but that is not the will of God. Jesus shall end his divinely appointed mission in Jerusalem: he *must* be on his way (v. 33). He does not go to Jerusalem in order to escape death at the hands of Herod but to die there. He shall be killed there just as the prophets had been killed. Jesus' lament over Jerusalem is cherished for this beautiful simile of God's love, which is like a mother hen that draws her young under her wings when danger threatens. Maternal images of God are rare in the Bible but this is one of them and it is rightly treasured. But what sadness: the children of Jerusalem are exposed and vulnerable but they will not accept God's protection. Instead, Jerusalem will betray God by rejecting his son. Fateful events lie ahead and these verses loom as portents.

Resting place

The synoptic gospels all agree that Jesus made his final approach to Jerusalem from Jericho, about twenty miles northeast of Jerusalem, arriving at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, just east of the holy city. It was here that Jesus sent his disciples into the village to find the colt that he would use for his entry into Jerusalem. But the Fourth Gospel provides one final, beautiful scene before his triumphal entry, a resting place in Bethany at the home of Martha and Mary and Lazarus—who-once-was-dead:

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

John 12:1-3

Smell the fragrance of the costly perfume. Sense its opulence and its luxury, its extravagance and its excess. Savour its wealth and its richness, its affluence and its indulgence. Then know the abundant love and devotion of Mary who poured it out and pray that the same might overflow from you today.

Question 3

Are you by nature a Martha or a Mary, a doer or a contemplative?

Prayer:

Lord Jesus,
as you set your face toward Jerusalem,
knowing the suffering that lay ahead,
teach us to follow with faithful hearts.
When the road feels hard
and the cost of discipleship high,
give us courage to trust you
and humility to serve.
Lead us in obedience,
strengthen us in sacrifice,
and draw us closer to you
as we walk the path of your love.
Amen.



Week 6: The journey from the gates of the Holy City to Golgotha

Journey

It's Holy Week, that terrible week of betrayal, arrest, denial, trial and crucifixion; the week of foot washing, a final meal and the anguished prayer in Gethsemane. A week that ends at Golgotha with death and burial. It's a week we have to immerse ourselves in fully if we are genuinely to experience the joy of Easter. Jesus is clear that his death is not the end of the story for him, it is the pathway to glory. His earthly sojourn is to be followed by another journey: he is going to God. It is not the end of the story for his disciples either, for where he is going, they will follow. The path of glory is laid with pain and suffering but death does not have the final word: in his Father's house there are many resting places.

We join Jesus and the twelve at the Last Supper. This was the annual Passover (or "paschal" from the Latin *pascha* meaning feast of Passover) meal held at sundown at the start of the festival, the recurring remembrance of Israel's deliverance from bondage in Egypt. The paschal supper was celebrated in Jerusalem in family groups and other small gatherings, involving unleavened bread (symbolizing the haste of that unforgettable night of the exodus) and roasted lamb (commemorating the firstborn divinely spared in their blood-sprinkled houses), the lambs having been ritually slaughtered in the temple precincts. Four cups of wine were ceremonially drunk at specified points, associated in turn with sanctification, deliverance, redemption and praise. Jesus' breaking of the bread came after the second cup (deliverance) and it was probably at this point that Judas departed into the night to betray his master. The cup of wine that Jesus took was the third cup (redemption).

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, "Surely not I, Lord?" He answered, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born." Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" He replied, "You have said so." While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

Matthew 26:20-29

Jesus uses the great symbols of that ritual meal – the unleavened bread and cup of redemption – as metaphors for his own body and blood. Metaphors that pointed to God as deliverer in the Old Testament now point to God through Jesus: *I am* the bread of freedom; *I am* the cup of salvation; it is *my* body and *my* blood that will set you free from your bondage to sin and death. Christ, the paschal lamb, reprises the deliverance of the Israelites in the first Passover.



Question 1

What does it mean to you to eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus?

After the fourth cup of wine was drunk and the Hallel (Psalms of praise) was sung, they went out to the Mount of Olives. In Gethsemane – a Hebrew name meaning “oil press” – Jesus prays to his Father in preparation for the terrible events that are to come that night: betrayal, arrest, the ignominy of Peter’s denial and two trials.

The first is before the Sanhedrin of Jerusalem, the highest Jewish court in the land. The charge is blasphemy, the sentence prescribed by law upon conviction: death by stoning (Leviticus 24:16). Jesus is found guilty, but a capital sentence cannot be handed down by this court under Roman provincial rule (John 18:31), so Jesus is referred to the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, who alone holds the power of life and death. But blasphemy, the charge on which Jesus had been found guilty under Jewish law, was not a crime for which Roman law provided any punishment. It was necessary, therefore, for the Sanhedrin to conjure up a new charge before handing Jesus over to Pilate — *lèse-majesté*, or treason. “King of the Jews” still meant “Messiah” so far as the charge of blasphemy was concerned, but to Pilate it meant something more like “Leader of the Resistance”. Jesus’ pretensions to kingship were politically subversive, a crime against the authority of Imperial Rome, punishable by death.

It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.” And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left.

Mark 15:25–27

It was always going to end like this, God’s plan from the very beginning, “destined before the foundation of the world” (1 Peter 1:20), God’s way of restoring fallen humanity to himself: an innocent man goes willingly to his death in place of a guilty man (Barabbas), one sinless person for all the sinful people who ever lived. “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

Pilate thought that he was in control, that Jesus’ life was in his hands. Barabbas was a pawn in his game, a lifeline thrown to Jesus who Pilate never thought for a moment was guilty of treason. But it wasn’t his game, it was God’s game, and the stakes were far higher than Pilate ever knew. He was a piece on the chessboard, just like Judas and Caiaphas, and the only thing the outcome ever depended on was Jesus’ obedience to his Father’s will. He never wavered.

It was God’s game all along and it was always going to end like this — except, of course, this is not the end. It cannot end like this, not with thorns and nails, blood and agony, mockery and derision. The grandmaster of the universe has one last spectacular move to make. The end is still to come.

Question 2

Can you remember a moment when things felt very dark, but someone or something brought light and hope?



Resting place

When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where the body was laid.

Mark 15:42–47

It is almost impossible to comprehend the death of God. But dead he was, the centurion in charge of the crucifixion squad confirms it. The creator of all life, lifeless. And yet we know this to be important, not only for what is about to happen but because now God knows what suffering and death are like for us.

After crucifixion, the release of the body to a family member for dignified burial was quite normal — except for those like Jesus who had been convicted of treason. Their bodies would be left to decay, eaten by predatory animals. Perhaps Mary the mother of Jesus knew this, which is why she did not herself petition Pilate for the body. In an extraordinary turn of events, a sympathizer emerges from the ranks of Jesus' enemies. He is a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court that had convicted Jesus, and he boldly claims the body for burial. The disciples, even if they hadn't fled, could not have succeeded in this: Pilate would never have agreed to such an unusual and irregular request had it not come from a member of the wealthy aristocracy of Jerusalem. Sympathetic outsiders – even believers – can be found everywhere. Never judge a book by its cover.

Question 3

What might the women who followed Jesus to the end have to say to us about the things they had seen?

Prayer:

Lord Jesus,
we come before you in the quiet of this moment,
remembering the stillness of the tomb where you were laid.
As you rested in the grave,
teach us to rest in your Father's will,
to trust when we cannot see,
to wait with hope when all feels hopeless.
In our own times of loss,
grant us faith in the darkness,
peace in the waiting
and hearts open to the new dawn you promise
as we place our lives in your wounded hands.
Amen.



