

Lenten Study 4

Lent is (or can be) a challenging time. It can be a wilderness journey of reflection... soul searching... and God experiencing. So we begin our Lenten Journey

Lent is about honesty in our reflection on life, and faith; in addressing our doubts and fears; about entering into prayerfulness and God seeking; and it's about questioning and renewal. *When was the last time your faith took a major turn or change or you experienced some great new revelation?*

Lent can be a walk with the disciples; with them we observe and listen to Jesus. At the same time this can be a walk with Jesus; with him we share in his temptations, doubts and fears, and we share in his hopes and prayers. This will be a faith journey and we wonder if our faith will sustain us.

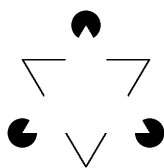
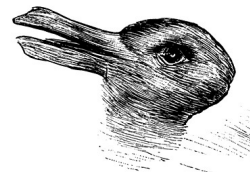
During Lent we follow Jesus into the wilderness for some soul searching, we ask some big questions of God, we ask some big questions of ourselves, we reconsider life and the meaning of life, and the meaning of *my life*.

In the wilderness what is important will come sharply into focus and what is insignificant will scurry away. In the wilderness we will face some uncomfortable truths: perhaps about ourselves; we will face some scary truths – perhaps about our faith; we will face some new challenges – that may upset us and test us to the limit. What new things will God say? Are we like those of old who prayed: “Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, neither let me see this great fire any more” (Deut. 18:16).

Prayer... “Loving God, you have been with me all my life but I have been blind to your presence. I the wilderness I call for you to reveal yourself – yet my cry is half hearted... for I am not sure what a vision of you will mean for my life. I say with Thomas, show yourself to me, but in that instant when you show yourself to me I know I will never be the same again. I come seeking you yet I am not sure if I want to find you. Leave the scales in front of my eyes for now Father, until I am sure that I want to see.”

Scripture Reading: Acts 9: 8-19.

Sharing: In the Judean Wilderness you often have to look and... look again, for what you think you see... you are in fact not sure if you do see. “I once was blind but now I see...” and, “I saw the light...” and also, “it was like scales falling from my eyes...” When have we used such terms? We often use the term for a “eureka” moment when at last we see it! Some see a duck while some see a rabbit! Many pictures of the optical illusion type are designed to have more than one image within. Sometimes we even see things that are not there! In the Judean Wilderness we came to see... not to be confused!



There is only one triangle in the picture. You may see a second triangle but *it's not there!* You only think it's there. Your brain is filling in some gaps. The three circles have a slice cut out of them and the triangle has three lines missing but there is no white triangle. We are meant to look and look again; we are meant to consider, discuss and come to “ah!... Now I see it...!” Now you see it now you don't!

Concerning “*Reading the Bible*” – do you look for layers of meaning?

The Bible is written in layers, and deliberately written with inner meaning. Can you think of any Bible books or Bible passages in particular?

The Transfiguration event may stand out for you as it is clearly with various meanings, some of which are for the Jews and which the Gentiles may not even see. For example isn't this Mt. Sinai all over again with a mountain top experience, clouds, the voice of God, the glory of God, the glowing, and the presence of Moses. What was this passage telling the Jews – it is a passage that is primarily for them. There is **Jesus' baptism** which has layers and offers more than one meaning, for example there is a Trinitarian purpose (Father's voice, beloved Son and coming of the Holy Spirit), a “he is the one” purpose, a “one on behalf of the many” purpose, a “sacrificial lamb purpose”, etc. Where else in the Bible can you see great imagery used with multi-layers of meaning?

Is the passage in Acts about *healing blindness* and only about restoring sight? What else might it be saying?

Have you ever experienced anything like *scales falling from your eyes*?

What do you think of those like Saul of Tarsus who is a Jew persecuting this new Jewish sect?

Christians have fought religious wars, why?

Christian thought on 'religious wars' have changed in recent years, why?

In the Judean Wilderness Jesus wonders if he will be victorious in battle like his namesake 'Joshua'.

How will I be victorious for your Father? *Pause for thought.*

What do you think of Thomas and those like Thomas who question & doubt?

What of those who cannot accept walking on water stories, feeding 5,000 from 5 loaves and 2 fish, and other miracle stories? Is there any hope for them or can they not be Christians?

In the Wilderness you are reflecting: you are meditating on your faith journey; you are trying to see your faith, your calling and even your vision of God from another angle.

How difficult is it to see anything afresh, to *change opinions*, or to move in faith?

What was your first big move in faith? When was your last move in faith (and what was it?) as you looked at something again and saw something new, which had always been 'staring you in the face'?

Known as *the mother, father and daughter image* this image shows a young girl, an old woman and an old man. Sometimes what we have looked at we have only ever looked at in one way. Sometimes we may be fearful to look again – is that because we become comfortable with the way we now see things? "Do you want to see?" Jesus asked a blind man.



Is there a danger in moving from seeing to *becoming blind*?

Isn't that what we find in the gospels with the religious leaders – aren't they blind?

Wasn't this Jesus' criticism of Nicodemus in John 3?

What challenges you most in the Christian faith – *something that others see but you cannot*?

What Bible passages reveal a new revelation of God? *Why not look for these through the week?*

"You have heard it said but now I say..." Imagine hearing that for the first time...

"You have seen God like that now I will reveal God like this... look!"

And finally, is God merciful?

Mercy is in forgiving those who are guilty. Mercy is not in someone else paying the price – that would not be mercy; that would still be judgment, but carried out on another. When the guilty plead for mercy it is not that another is punished in their place but that the judge forgives them. Mercy is outright forgiveness on the guilty. Is God merciful? If God needs to be placated or appeased before forgiving then this is not mercy.

Have you always seen God as judgmental – even when you have '*said*' that God is merciful? Christians often say, '*God is merciful*' though they never mean it, they mean God is merciful after he has taken his punishment out on another... is that mercy?

If you look again, can you see God as merciful?

Isn't Jesus utterly merciful on the cross?

Doesn't love bear all, endure all and take hurt to self?

Love does not seek revenge or to 'get even'; doesn't love forgive love's enemies?

Can you see it? Can you see God as merciful?

Prayer: (Pause at the end of each line)

"Father I believe... help my unbelief. Father I see... help my blindness.

I confess that I have often only ever seen you according to my image of you.

You reveal yourself to me in many ways but I see you only in one way.

I have sung songs saying, open my eyes Lord, I want to see Jesus" yet to see him is to be changed in the twinkling of an eye.

In this Wilderness journey you are asking me to look again.

Be careful what you ask for...!

If you are ready you may pray, "Father, let the scales fall from my eyes, let me see... let me see...

And now, into your hands I commend my life." AMEN.

This Lenten journey in the wilderness is beginning to bear fruit.

The Grace... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.