



Opening Prayer for Lent (Cranmer's *Collect for Purity*)

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden;
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts,
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord.

Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

If you had to sum up what it means to be a disciple, what would your three top priorities be, and why?

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 27

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

**When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh –
my adversaries and foes – they shall stumble and fall.**

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud;
be gracious to me, and answer me!
'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!'
Your face, Lord, do I seek.

Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.

Do not cast me off or forsake me, O God of my salvation!

If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.
Teach me your way, O Lord,
and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.

**I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.**

Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the Lord!

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.

Amen

Prayers of Renewal

Let us pray:

Jesus told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him, they needed to deny themselves, and take up their crosses.

God calls us into that same movement of dying to sin and rising again with Christ.

In this quiet space for reflection, let us bring to God those things in need of renewal:

Silence is kept for a few moments...

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
grant us peace.

God of our journeys and false starts and new beginnings, you walk with us all of our days, and nothing in life or death or all creation can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ.

Thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes, share with us in our worries and struggles, and lead us onwards into fullness of life.

We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus.

Amen

Reading Luke 13:31 – 35

Sermon

What do you desire most? If you are really honest with yourself, and allow yourself to be vulnerable enough to go there, what do you long for and care about the most? Desire can be a difficult subject to talk about, precisely because it exposes deep vulnerabilities. It reaches down into the core of who we are, and might sometimes expose us to aspects of ourselves we find difficult or uncomfortable, and hence normally keep out of sight and mind. There are many social taboos, which can make it hard to be honest both with ourselves and others, especially in situations where we have been made to feel ashamed. I recently celebrated ten years since I 'came out' as trans and began at last to be able to live authentically. One of the reasons it took me almost three decades to do this was the deep shame I felt, because of the attitudes of other people and a lack of positive representation. Moreover, it does not help that the Church has had somewhat of an ambiguous relationship with the whole subject of desire, to the point where some of our liturgies imply that heartfelt desire is dangerous, and hence is to be subjugated to the will of God. Certainly, it doesn't follow that if we desire something, it must be good. Yet, desires are what fundamentally 'drive us forward' as human beings. Contrary to Enlightenment philosophy, we are not just cerebral creatures.

Today's reading contains three distinct uses of the Greek term *thelo* which invite us to ponder the subject of desire and longing. The first comes in Luke 13:31, where some Pharisees approach Jesus while he is travelling around the villages and towns of Galilee, casting out demons and healing the sick. They advise him to leave urgently, as Herod, who was the tetrarch in charge of the Galilee region, desired to kill him. Secondly, in 13:34, his anguished lament over Jerusalem expresses Jesus' desire to gather the people under his wings like a mother hen. Thirdly, we're told that the city did not desire this, hence their rejecting his ministry (13:34). In these different expressions of

longing, we therefore build up a complex picture of deeply held, and starkly conflicting, desires.

The political landscape of those times was more than a little bumpy. Roman occupation was centred around Judea and its capital city of Jerusalem in particular. The Temple authorities derived their limited power from the mandate of Rome, and having the palace which the Roman governor occupied when he came into the city quite literally looming down over them must have been extremely intimidating for the Chief Priests. Thus, they effectively collaborated with Rome and sought to keep them onside to maintain their own authority. Against this, bands of Jewish zealots were determined to overthrow imperial rule by violent means. So, it was not unusual to see crucified bodies rotting on crosses strewn throughout the Judean countryside to stop others being tempted to rebel lest they too suffer the same fate. Out in the wider regions, the authority once afforded to Herod the Great, in the decades before Jesus's birth, had been divided up among the four puppet rulers, or tetrarchs, that included Herod Antipas. Again, it was in his interests to keep Rome sweet, and like his father, deep insecurity marked his reign, as he presided over Galilee.

If the Pharisees who approached Jesus on the road were telling the truth about Herod's desires, perhaps his murderous intent stemmed from a fear that John the Baptist, who Herod had executed because the prophet dared to challenge his authority, had somehow returned in the person of Jesus (Luke 9:7 – 9). We cannot simply take all this as read, however, as we know that Herod had the chance to kill him, after his arrest by the Jerusalem religious authorities, but chose not to do so (23:6 – 12). There is no suggestion that the Pharisees were deliberately being deceptive, so maybe they had got the wrong end of the stick somehow. Yet, we also know that Herod was capable of disregarding human life when it suited him, and certainly, Jesus had long been a thorn in the side of the religious authorities (Luke 5:17). For their part, the political and religious powers of Jerusalem appear

to have had good reasons to keep Jesus in check, and it is possible that many ordinary people supported the anti-Roman rebels and the urgent desire for freedom into which they tapped. Into this situation, with all its complexities and the long history of rejection and murders of prophetic figures (see, for example, Jeremiah 26:20 – 23), we get the heartfelt desire of Jesus to gather in the people of Jerusalem as a mother hen gathers her brood. This expresses the longing of God, seen through centuries of Israel's life, for true peace and flourishing, for abundant life for all creation. Jesus knew that death awaited him there (13:32 – 33), yet would not be diverted from this course.

So, today's short passage expresses a complex mesh of conflicting longings and desires. As you reflect on this passage and the journey of self-examination which comes in this season of Lent, what do you truly desire? Are you like Herod, seeking after power, patronage, or status? Do you seek riches, pleasure, possessions or fame as what you believe will make you happy? Or, is your deepest desire to draw near to God, and follow Jesus in being a person who models in their relating and actions the abundant life he came to bring? Lent affords us time to ask the hard questions of ourselves, and reckon honestly with the conflicting desires we all have as human beings, as we look to live authentically in a messy and complex world. We aren't 'head' creatures only; our heartfelt desires matter and God is not ashamed to hear us express them in prayer. Some of those will lead us closer to God and to fullness of life; others may be attractive on the surface but ultimately destructive for us, like those longings of many of those caught up in the political web of the Jerusalem of Jesus's day. Lent, if we use it well, is a time to ask for wisdom to discern the difference, and to direct our hearts accordingly. Amen

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

The Examen is a way of reflecting on the day that's past, where we have caught glimpses of God at work, and what we need to change in our lives in order to make God's love visible to those we meet.

Prayers of Intercession

God of costly and self-giving love,
as we journey onwards towards the cross of Christ
and seek transformation for ourselves, and for your world,
we bring our prayers for others to you.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those living in places blighted by war and conflict
and all those forced to leave everything behind to find refuge.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those impacted right now by climate change,
and all working to support communities at the sharp end.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are unwell in body, mind or spirit,
and all working in health and social care in these tough times.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are feeling lonely, isolated or anxious,
and especially for those struggling to accept they are lovable.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are living with addictions of any kind,
and for all who wrestle with destructive desires and wants.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are bereaved in this time of turmoil,
especially those struggling to access support and care.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,
and in the presence of the Holy Spirit,
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

Lord's Prayer

Final Prayer – Collect for the Second Sunday of Lent

Christ, Son of the living God,
who for a season laid aside the divine glory
and learned obedience through suffering:
teach us in all our afflictions
to raise our eyes to the place of your mercy
and to find in you our peace and deliverance.
We make our prayer in your name. **Amen**

Blessing

As you journey onwards in God's love,
towards the foot of the cross of Christ,
may you step forward boldly and act justly,
so that through you, all may know that they matter.
And the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be upon you, and all whom you love and pray for,
now and for ever. **Amen**