



THE ROAD TO
Emmaus

Helen Julian CSF

COMPANIONS FOR THE JOURNEY THROUGH LENT

CONTENTS

Introduction	8
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Thomas Traherne

Ash Wednesday: Enjoying the world	12
Thursday: The right treasure	15
Friday: The throne of love	18
Saturday: As a child	21
Performance	24

Lent 1: The Venerable Bede

Sunday: All things in common	28
Monday: Faithful to the faithful God	31
Tuesday: God of history	34
Wednesday: God at work	37
Thursday: The bread of the word	40
Friday: A believing teacher	43
Saturday: Constant praise	46
Performance	49

Lent 2: Aelred of Rievaulx

Sunday: Man of friendship	52
Monday: A balanced life	55
Tuesday: Miracle at Bethany	58
Wednesday: Christ in our midst	61
Thursday: The consolations of scripture	64
Friday: Mary our mother	67
Saturday: Keeping the sabbath	70
Performance	73

Lent 3: The Cloud of Unknowing

Sunday: Into the cloud	78
Monday: God's gift of prayer	81
Tuesday: A naked intention to God	84
Wednesday: The sinful self	87
Thursday: Longing love	90
Friday: Forgetful of self	93
Saturday: Waiting in the darkness	96
Performance	99

Lent 4: John and Charles Wesley

Sunday: Justified by faith.....	104
Monday: The gift of grace	107
Tuesday: Faith, works and love	110
Wednesday: Preaching salvation	113
Thursday: The harvest of righteousness	116
Friday: Theology with wings	119
Saturday: A covenant of the heart	122
Performance	125

Lent 5: John Donne

Sunday: A passionate man.....	128
Monday: A loving God	131
Tuesday: A contrite heart.....	134
Wednesday: In sickness and in health	137
Thursday: The fear of death.....	140
Friday: Death shall die	143
Saturday: A mind transformed.....	146
Performance	149

Holy Week: Julian of Norwich

Palm Sunday: Our courteous Lord	152
Monday: Jesus our mother	155
Tuesday: Falling and rising.....	158
Wednesday: The image of Christ	161
Maundy Thursday: The servant king	164
Good Friday: Compassion and contrition	167
Saturday: Waiting with Christ's lovers	170
Easter Sunday: Love stronger than death	173
Easter Monday: The journey continues	176
Performance	179
Continuing the journey	181
References.....	187
Notes	191

INTRODUCTION

For many Christians, Lent is a time of heightened and more purposeful engagement with the many elements of the Christian life. It has, of course, a particular focus on discipline, penitence, fasting and reflection on the passion of Christ, but for many it is also a time to overhaul their prayer life, to read the scriptures in a more organized way, and to serve others more consciously.

The seven figures from British spirituality whom you will meet in this book are, I hope, good guides on this pilgrimage through Lent. Through their lives and work, Lenten themes and others can be illuminated. They are all authors, so if any become particular friends and guides to you during this Lenten journey, you can continue to travel with them after finishing this book, by exploring further their own writings.

The journey of this book takes you from joy, the joy of creation, through places of darkness and struggle, and places of light, encouragement and growth, to the rediscovered joy of re-creation.

Along the way there are opportunities to put into practice some of what the companions are offering as their particular gift. Julian of Norwich, with whom we will walk through Holy Week, wrote of her own book, ‘This book is begun by God’s gift and his grace; but it is not yet performed’.¹ To be really effective, this book needs to be ‘performed’; put into practice in ways which engage body, spirit, and mind—which is why you will find a section headed ‘Performance’ at the end of each week’s readings.

All of the suggested activities can be carried out on your own if that is how you are using the book. If you are using it in a group, I recommend that each of you commit yourself to trying at least one of the suggestions each week, and then, when you meet, sharing with each other what you did and how it worked for you. You might also like to share what you found helpful or puzzling in the week’s

readings. There are no right or wrong answers; anything that draws you closer to God and helps you to reflect on your pilgrimage of faith is valuable.

Don't feel that you have to follow the daily reading format exactly if that doesn't suit you. You may choose to read several days at once, and then have a day or more free to spend on one of the activities.

Our Christian journey is never made alone, however it may sometimes feel. The great company of our fellow travellers extends through time and space; may this Lent be a time when some of these companions become real friends and guides to you.

— ASH WEDNESDAY TO SATURDAY —

Thomas Traherne



Ash Wednesday

ENJOYING THE WORLD

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day...

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

GENESIS 1:1–5; 2:4B–8

Today, in churches all over the world, worshippers will have a cross of ash marked on their foreheads. With it go the words, ‘Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return’, words drawing on this passage of Genesis and used also in the Anglican burial service.

It seems a suitably penitential but perhaps rather depressing start to Lent. It is a reminder of mortality, of the fragility of life, and of the

reality that we will all end as anonymous dust, some sooner, some later.

But it can also be a positive reminder that we are created beings, who can celebrate our creation and our Creator. Our very existence rests on the God who formed us and breathed life into us, and who continues to provide us with what we need to live—air and water and light. As Christians, we belong to a faith that values the things of the earth, seeing them as gifts of God. In Lent, in many churches, they are used powerfully for their symbolism: the ash of Ash Wednesday, the oil blessed by the bishop for use in anointing during the coming year, the water for the foot-washing on Maundy Thursday, and the new fire kindled on Easter Day. We are made of the earth, and our life is rooted in it.

Thomas Traherne, our first companion, would have sympathized with this view. He himself died in his 40s, in 1674, and it seemed for a long time that he had joined the company of the anonymous dead. He wrote many meditations, in prose and poetry, but none were published during his lifetime and it was only the chance discovery of a manuscript on a second-hand book barrow in Farringdon Road, London, in 1896 that brought him to a new and appreciative audience.

The known facts of his life are few. He was born in Hereford, around 1637, the son of a shoemaker. He was educated at Brasenose College, Oxford, during the Commonwealth, and then appointed rector of the parish of Credenhill near Hereford, in 1657. When the monarchy was restored, he was ordained in the Anglican Church. In 1667 he became chaplain to the Lord Keeper of the Seals, who had his household at Teddington, Middlesex, and it was there that Traherne died.

With the restoration of the monarchy came also the newly restored Book of Common Prayer, and Traherne valued its emphasis on a regular pattern of prayer with others, made up largely of psalms and scripture. He also valued its sanctification of time through the various seasons, special festivals and saints' days of the year. But it is for his love of creation, above all, that Traherne is known and

appreciated today. He always found the world beautiful, writing in his poem 'Nature', 'The world's fair beauty set my soul on fire.'¹ People were not left out of this appreciation: Traherne was gregarious and sociable. In one of his private notebooks he wrote, 'Thou, Lord, hast made thy servant a sociable creature for the praise of thy name; a lover of company.'² He always remembered having seen, as a child, an empty banqueting hall transformed as it filled up with 'lords and ladies and music and dancing'. 'I perceived,' he wrote, 'that men and women are, when well understood, a principal part of our true felicity.'³

So Traherne enjoyed the world not for himself alone, but also in order to lead others to the same enjoyment. In one of his most famous passages, he writes powerfully of a rapturous enjoyment of the world, an enjoyment made deeper because there are others with whom to share it.

You never enjoy the world aright, till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you. Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world.

*Yet further, you never enjoy the world aright, till you so love the beauty of enjoying it, that you are covetous and earnest to persuade others to enjoy it.'*⁴

PRAYER

Creator God, thank you for having created me, and for sustaining me through your gifts. Make me more aware of your presence in your creation, and eager to bring others to know you. Amen.

THE ROAD TO *Emmaus*

Helen Julian CSF is an Anglican Franciscan sister, a member of the Community of St Francis, and presently serving as Minister Provincial for her community. She has also written Living the Gospel and The Lindisfarne Icon for BRF, and is a member of the contributor team for New Daylight Bible reading notes.

Lent is a time when many Christians choose to focus on some of the disciplines of life as a follower of Jesus, from prayer and fasting to Bible study. This book of Lent readings offers us a chance to reflect, day by day, on the experiences and teaching of some key figures in English spiritual history. Through the intervening centuries, their words speak to our hearts, illuminating new truths, enriching our faith and affirming us in our own walk with God.

From a host of possible subjects, author Helen Julian has chosen seven: Julian of Norwich, Thomas Traherne, the Venerable Bede, John Donne, John and Charles Wesley, Aelred of Rievaulx, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. She shares something of their stories, their historical context, and the themes unique to their writing. With links to relevant Bible passages, she suggests imaginative exercises for groups and individuals to put into practice what we have learnt.



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