

Lent, a time of examination and renewal

Lent is the season when many followers of Jesus Christ undertake an intentional spiritual preparation before Easter. This involves self-examination and a renewed commitment to Christian discipleship.

The readings from the Lectionary guide this year's journey through the season of Lent. The booklet is entitled Learnings for Life. It contains reflections that may probe, stretch and challenge - but hopefully in positive and life-giving ways. While some of the readings may seem very familiar, there are always new lessons to learn. Lent is the ideal time for contemplation, and we

pray that you will experience a brighter and stronger sense of purpose as you travel the road toward Easter.

At the end of the Lenten journey is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. On the Cross Jesus pours himself out for our sake. He empties himself in the ultimate act of service to all humanity. And on Easter morning Jesus takes up new life in his resurrection, symbolising our hope in him.

For now, the journey begins. The example of Jesus in his interactions with all kinds of people shows us a great deal about the

character and purposes of God. There's so much to learn both from what our Lord says and does.

Lent in the Anglican Church

While the observance of Lent varies between church denominations, it is universally recognised as a time of repentance and consecration. For the Anglican Church, the 40 days of Lent begin on Ash Wednesday and continue up to Holy Saturday, with Sundays excluded. While the Bible does not mention the custom of Lent, its 40 days resonate with other special periods of 40 days recorded in Scripture (Matthew 4:1-11, Acts 1:3). Lent culminates in Easter, when all disciples of Christ celebrate new life in their resurrected Lord.

A searching question

Reading: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-10

The first question God asks in the Bible is found in Genesis 3:9. It is addressed to Adam in the Garden of Eden. 'Where are you?' God asks. The question searches and is searching. Adam is found hiding in the trees. He has turned away and disobeyed God's command, and is now aware of his own sense of separation and shame.

Adam, the first human, is emblematic of all humankind. The echo of God's first question can still be heard. Where are you? Do we hide ourselves, or our behaviours, from God? Adam's guilt was unstudied. But are we more well practised in our

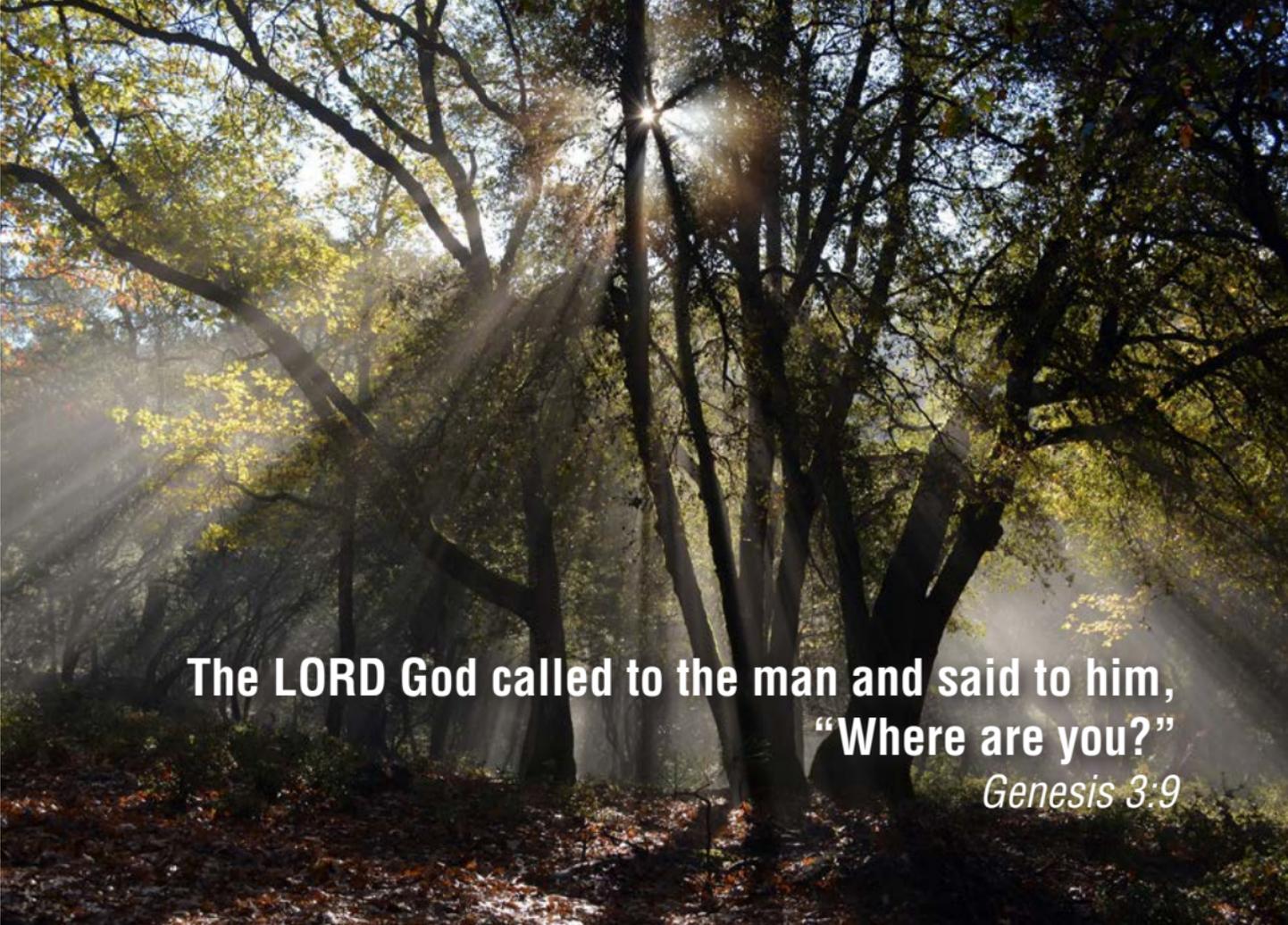
Photo: Jenna Beekhuis, www.unsplash.com/@jennabee

own attempts to deceive God, others, or ourselves? When our eyes are opened to what we are like, healing can begin. As the Psalmist implores:

Search me out, O God, and know my heart;
try me and examine my thoughts.
See if there is any way of wickedness in me
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139:23-24

God's heart is always full of grace. At the end of the Genesis passage the Lord God bends down and makes clothes for Adam and Eve. He desires to clothe us too with his goodness and mercy.



**The LORD God called to the man and said to him,
"Where are you?"**
Genesis 3:9

As the Spirit leads

Reading: John 3:1-17

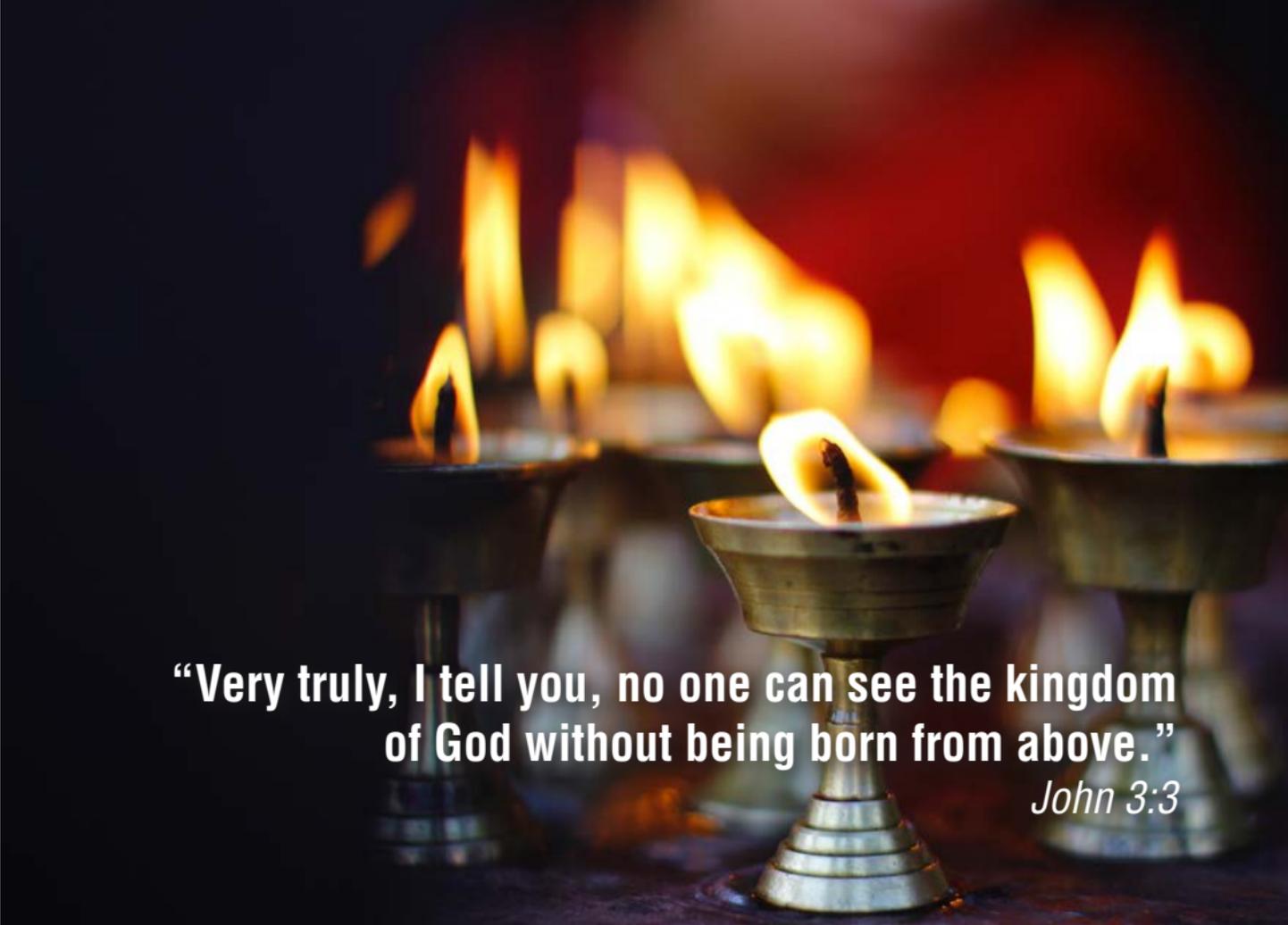
In John 3 is the marvellous story of Nicodemus, a teacher and leader of the Jews, who comes to Jesus at night. He literally steps into the light. Jesus explains that all who enter the kingdom of heaven must be born from above. It is the Spirit of God who guides, renews and transforms. Nicodemus has trouble understanding all this.

Have you ever wondered whether Jesus' words took hold? Nicodemus appears briefly again in John 7 when he argues that Jesus should be treated fairly by hostile Jewish authorities. Most poignantly, however, we encounter him in John

Photo: Mesh, www.unsplash.com/@crypticsy

19:39-40. This time Nicodemus comes in broad daylight, together with Joseph of Arimathea, to anoint the broken body of Jesus. Nicodemus brings spices worth a small fortune. In doing so, Jesus is given the gift of myrrh for a second time.

The light flickers, it glows steadily, and eventually burns brightly for all to see. It may take a while to gain full strength. Consider how you stepped into the light and settled down into your own journey of faith. How have you grown in God's Spirit? Have you ever displayed extravagant or costly love for Jesus, like Nicodemus did?



“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

John 3:3

Redefining boundaries

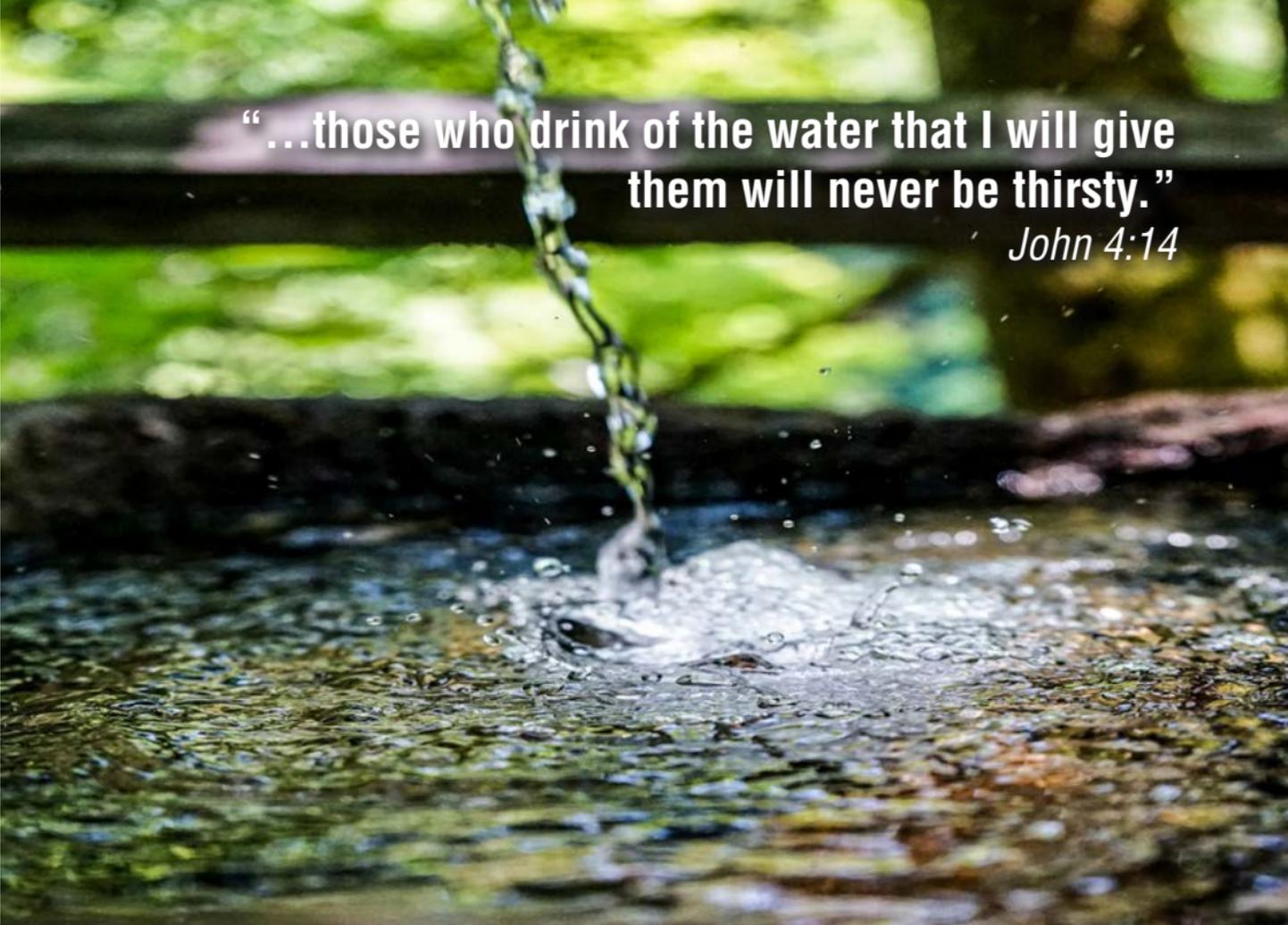
Reading: John 4:5-42

John 4 relates the story of Jesus at the well. Here, he converses with a Samaritan woman in the middle of the day. This was a bold thing to do. Jews and Samaritans deeply distrusted each other, women had a subservient role in society, and it was considered culturally inappropriate to talk alone with an unmarried female. Jesus breaks the social rules because he has an important message to share about himself – he is the Living Water. His desire is to share this liberating message of truth and inclusion with someone on the margins of society.

The message Jesus shares is truly startling. And his interlocutor's enthusiasm cannot be contained. She declares to her own people: 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done.'

This passage poses many questions for us today. Does the Living Water still taste as sweet and liberating for us? Why/Why not? Do you think we sometimes find ourselves confined by invisible social boundaries? How do Jesus' disciples react to his example? The Living Water of inclusion and truth has a wonderful name: Jesus. Draw deeply from his well!

Photo: Frank Albrecht, www.unsplash.com/@shotaspot



“...those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.”

John 4:14

Learning to see

Reading: John 9:1-41

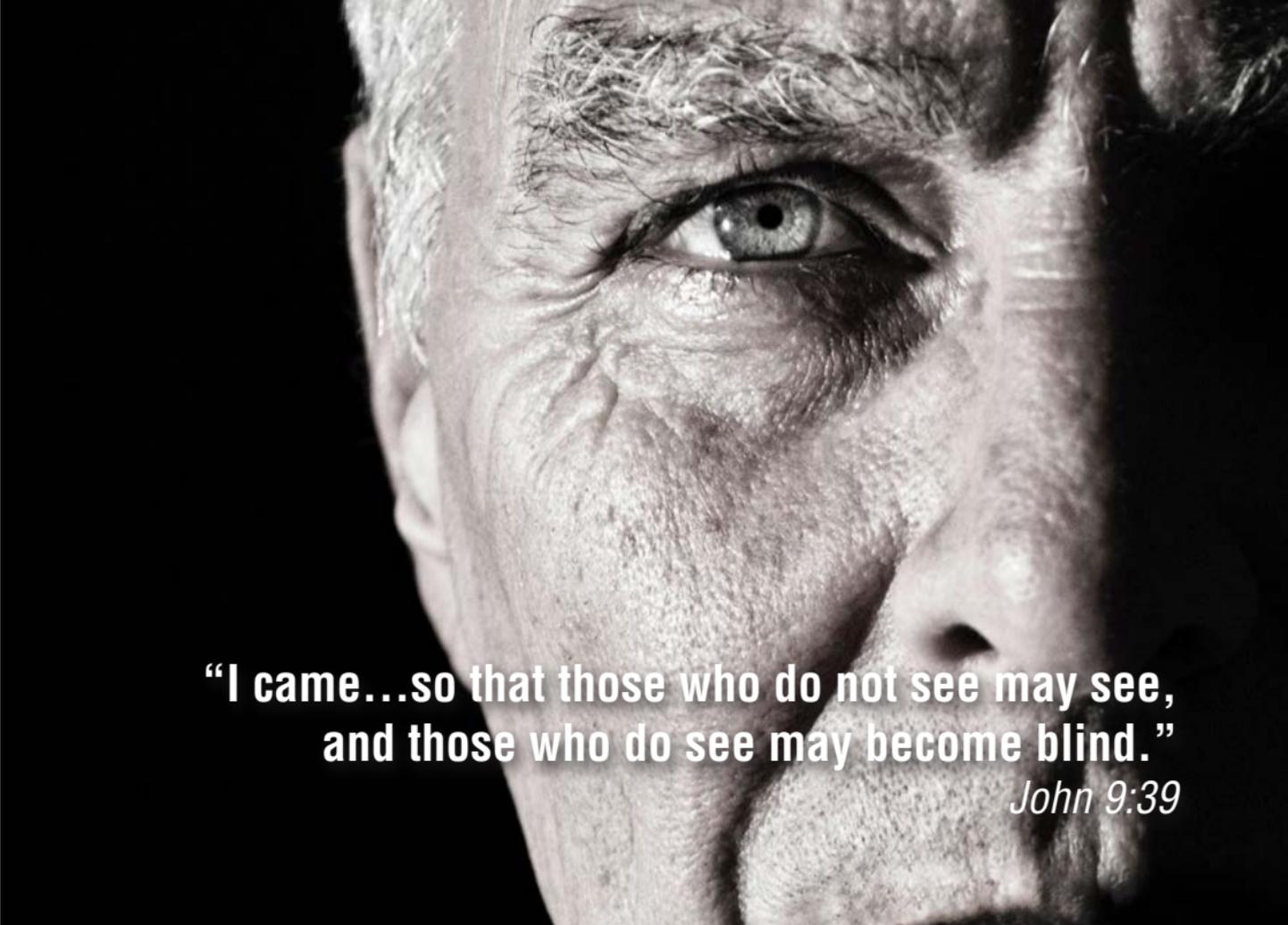
John 9 relays the saga of the healing of a blind man in which traditional beliefs are turned on their head. We learn that a man born blind is not blind because of his sin or the sin of his family. This is an amazing revelation in a society that treated congenital disability as evidence of sin and shame. A new, liberating and creative presence has arrived on the scene in the person of Jesus. How will this truth be received?

Sadly, when Jesus heals this blind man, the celebration is short-lived. Jesus heals the blind man on the Sabbath, providing the opportunity for powerful forces to mobilise

Photo: Simon Wijers, www.unsplash.com/@simonwijers

against him. His accusers allow form to overshadow substance and power to trump compassion. Those who can see become spiritually blind because of their suspicion and intransigence.

This week, ask yourself whether you can think of an example where you have refused to see something that is true, because it didn't fit with the narrative you were taught. Are there important things that you have been blinded to at different points in your own journey? Do you think vested interests still impede the mission of Jesus? Reflect and pray.



**“I came...so that those who do not see may see,
and those who do see may become blind.”**

John 9:39

Je suis Lazarus

Reading: John 11:1-44

Names are very important in Scripture. The name Lazarus is especially apt. In Hebrew it means 'the one God helps.' In the story, Lazarus, a friend of Jesus, dies and is buried in a tomb. It is several days before Jesus arrives on the scene. By then the grief of the community is at its peak. Jesus weeps too. But is his weeping for Lazarus, or for the lack of faith and insight that he encounters among the mourners?

Lazarus is helped dramatically by Jesus. He is called out from the tomb and is restored to life. Lazarus is indeed the one God helps. Jesus' amazing actions - and Lazarus' name - together point to the divinity of our Lord.

Photo: Traditional location of Lazarus' tomb. Nils von Kalm, Anglican Overseas Aid

It is important to remember that each one of us is helped by God. One message from the Lazarus story is that eternal life starts now. In a sense we are all Lazarus as we move from darkness into light in response to Jesus' call. We step out of the burial cave with Lazarus. Lazarus is still bound, symbolically at least, by the things of death. The grave clothes hang off him as he steps forth. What are the things that still bind us even though we have now entered God's light?



“Lazarus, come out!”
John 11:43

Things are not what they seem

Reading: Matthew 21:1-11

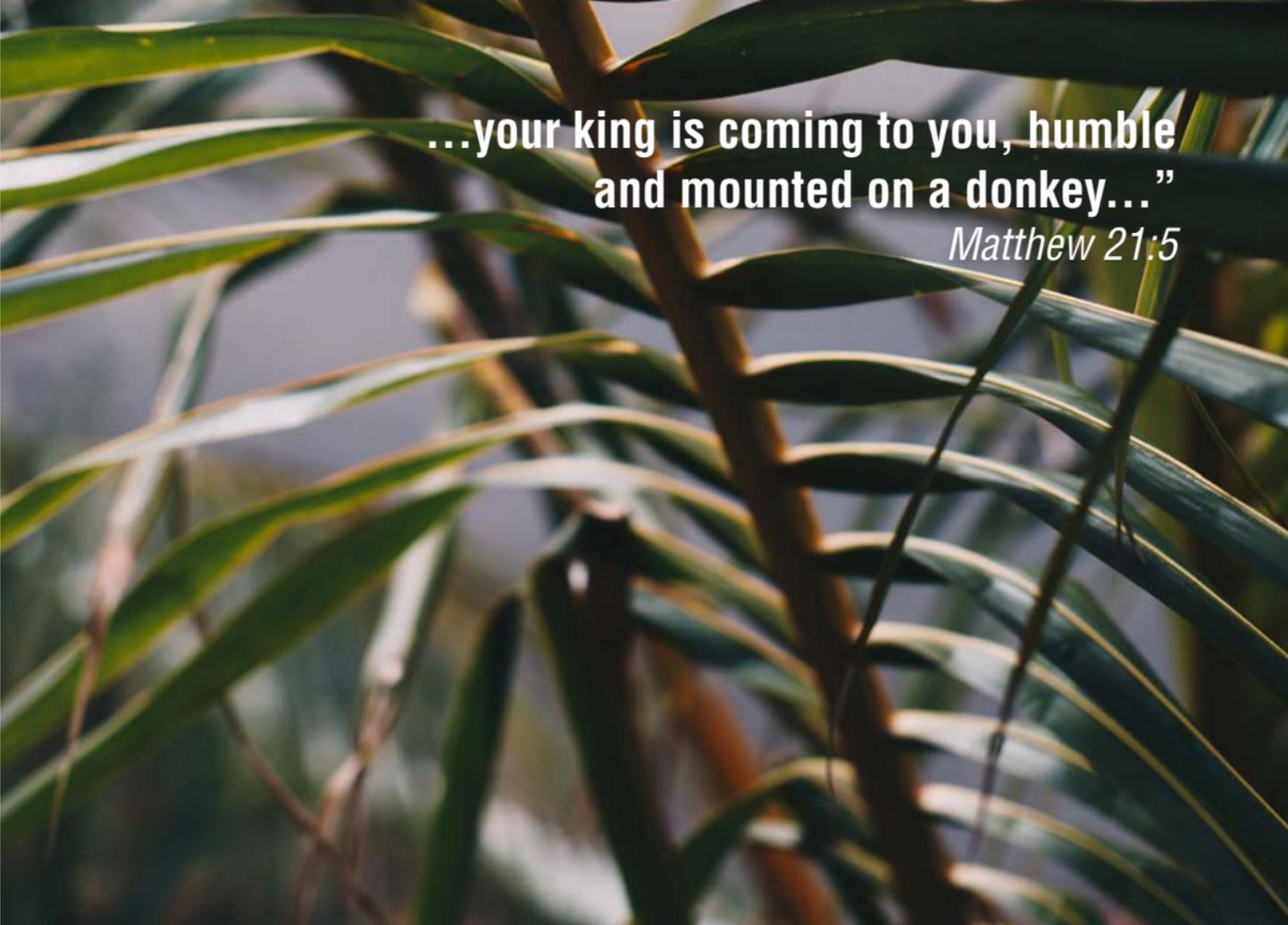
On Palm Sunday we see Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, the City of Peace. The occasion is festive, almost comical, as Jesus makes his humble procession on the back of a commandeered donkey. Jesus receives cheers from the crowds as the regal procession makes its way.

Despite their initial enthusiasm, people are fickle. Before the week is out their shouts of 'Hosanna' will turn to 'Crucify him!' A mock coronation will take place. Jesus will wear a robe of purple, a crown of thorns, and will hang dead below a sign declaring his regal status in three languages.

Photo: Jenny Marvin, www.unsplash.com/@jennymarvin

But what if the things being mocked are true? What if Jesus really is the crowning aspiration of the Jewish people and of all humans? What if his humiliating death is victory in progress? And what if the bleakness and blackness of the occasion is the darkness before an eternal dawn?

In life and death things are not always as they seem. One thing is for sure - those who have been forsaken and outcast by this world will find a true friend in Jesus. This week reflect on those details of Christ's Passion that are most significant for you.



**...your king is coming to you, humble
and mounted on a donkey..."**

Matthew 21:5



LIFE.
ABUNDANTLY.
FOR ALL.

This year the theme for our Lenten reflection is Learnings for Life. The ministry of Jesus continues to speak powerfully into our personal and social context. Following the seasonal lectionary readings, this reflection booklet provides a fresh opportunity to learn new insights about ourselves and our Lord God. We hope and pray that it enriches your discipleship on the journey towards Easter.

Our work at Anglican Overseas Aid is an attempt to live out the hope of Jesus in response to the brokenness of this world. We yearn for the coming of his kingdom, a time when life will be experienced in all its fullness. For now please join with us as we work and pray for a more just, peaceful and sustainable world. We sincerely hope that our programs around the world provide a glimpse of the life of the world to come.

Find out more at: www.anglicanoverseasaid.org.au or call us on 1800 249 880