

LENT 2 (2026)

“O Lord, you have given us your word....

I have borrowed that prayer from this very colourful Church of England 2026 guide, with 40 daily reflections commended by both our Archbishops’. In this second week of Lent we are encouraged to share the Scriptures and to see how they spill over into our working or leisurely lives, each and every day. The Scriptures are more than words to know. They are an invitation into a story to live in, a banquet to feast on, a guide to live life by, and a treasure to rejoice in.

The difficulties arise though, when we begin to unpick and interpret different histories and different meanings of often complex texts – the very opposite of those so-called self-help books written by people who claim to have figured this often messy life out.

So what about this scholar, Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews? Today’s Gospel is a real ding-dong of question and counter-question, so much so that one thinks Nicodemus has lost the plot, and enjoys arguing for the sake of it, as many academics or philosophers do! And yet, especially waking up to yesterday’s news, we have to persist in asking ourselves the difficult demands of interpretation. How do we understand and how do we apply, for example, the last verse in our Gospel:

“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

These wonderful claims of faith were written without the frightening backdrop we face today of nuclear war. One commentator said that Iran has the capability of launching such weapons which could reach London. It does not bear thinking about it. In fact it makes my preaching and my words feel so inadequate. Ironically, today's Psalm set for today is Psalm 121:

"I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth." And it concludes with words that I want to cling on to:

"The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; it is he who shall keep you safe. The Lord shall watch over your going out and your coming in, from this time forth for evermore."

We really don't want to do what politicians do on a daily basis and belittle one another, get the better of one another and outsmart one another - as Nicodemus attempts to do, but fails. We really do need to fall to our knees in times of crisis and danger "where prayer has been valid" (as T. S. Eliot famously said in his poem, 'Little Gidding'). We really do need to place our fears and hopes within Scripture's bigger story which spans from the beginning of time to its end.

The voice and guide of Jesus is at the heart of every Lenten pilgrimage. He answers the tempter's trick questions in the wilderness just as he answers today's annoying interrogation by Nicodemus. And he did so almost nonchalantly by quoting the Scriptures he knew so well. He could easily quote from Deuteronomy, for example, or the Psalms, because he

believed they **were** words from God's mouth that could sustain him, every bit as much as physical food. Chewing on the words of Scripture then and swallowing them deeply is something we can do together and, on our own...

Meditating on them so that they can become part of us, entering the deepest part of our souls, nourishing us with its truths. This has to be more vital than the 'fake news' that Lent is only about 'giving things up.'

I often think, as you know, that our public prayers should be a lot shorter and direct than they are and I particularly learn this from children. Here are two very unfussy, down to earth examples with which to reflect upon this week:

"Dear God,
Mend the lives of those damaged by war:
heal their wounds
and heal their hearts".

"In the fields of war
let us sow the seeds of peace."

Amen to both, but if you want an adult version from someone I would call an Anglican 'divine', John Keble, how about this definition of living prayer?

"Lord, make my heart a place where angels sing!"

In the name of....

AMEN.