

40 ERB G H I N

English Version

mcyn
malta catholic youth network



**LIFELONG
CATECHESIS**

Lenten Reflective Resources for Young People



This is a pack of reflective resources for young people to be used during Lent. This project is a collaboration between the Malta Catholic Youth Network and Lifelong Catechesis. As the title of this project suggests, all sessions revolve around the number 40 as inspired by the 40 days of Lent. We do not have many books in the Bible which consists of more than 40 chapters. In view of this, 2 out of 4 sessions would be reflecting on Isaiah 40 and Psalm 40. As observed, there is an additional session following the 4 sessions to be held during Lent. This added reflection should take place during the first days of Easter so as to manifest how the Easter celebration can redeem the 40 days of Lent.

All sessions have been recorded in Maltese in audio-visual format. You may access such content on YouTube, on our website mcyn.org or through the QR code below. We have provided a physical copy so that you can amend the content or format according to your group's needs.

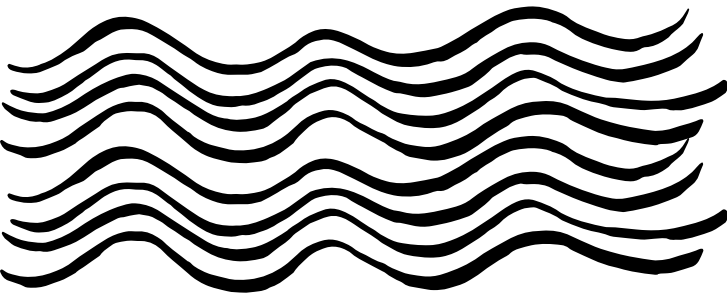
Whilst wishing you a blessed time of Lent and Easter, we promise you our prayers. Should you require further information, do not hesitate to contact us via email on: youths@maltadiocese.org



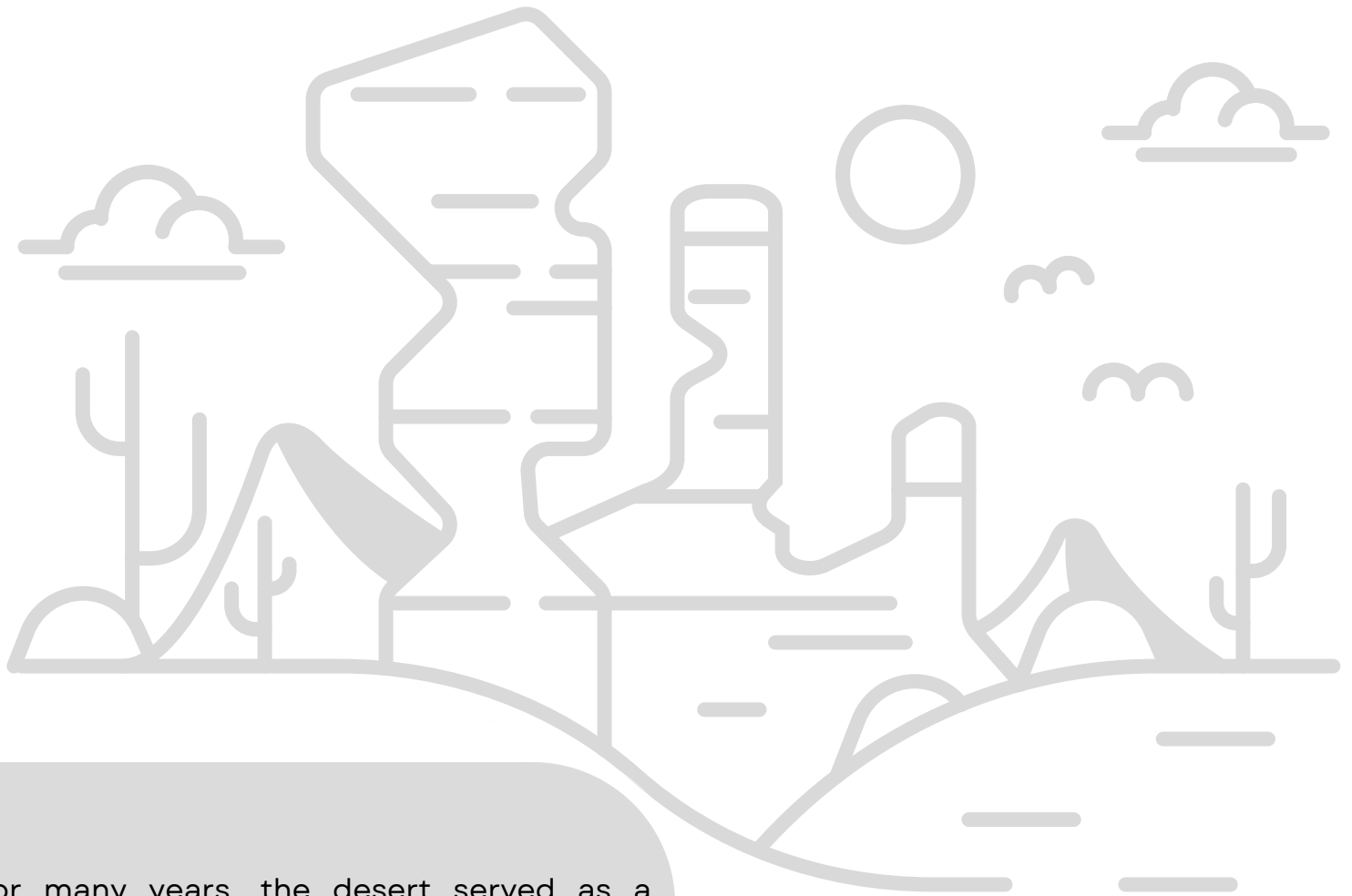


In the Bible, the number 40 is mentioned more than 140 times. 40 typically represents a prolonged period in which a person's faith is put to the test. Additionally, it is a time of encounter and spiritual renewal. It is clear in Scripture, that faith that is not tested is fragile (James 1:3).

It is difficult to trust God while we are going through difficulties in life. We occasionally wonder, "Where is God when it hurts?" Is He present? Does He understand the struggles I'm facing? Sometimes we question God and ask, "Why do You allow me to go through these trials?", "Why do these issues or hurts persist despite my prayers for You to remove them?" You could feel resentment, hurt, or even disappointment towards God. You are not alone. We all experience this at some point. Although we might want God to just solve all our problems, He has never given us such a guarantee. When we question, "Where is God?," Scripture gives us these wonderful stories that demonstrate how to seek Him out in them.



Let's start by looking at the Biblical story many are familiar with – Noah and the 40-day Flood. The narrative of Noah and the Flood is one of rebellion and loyalty. Noah stood out in a time of tremendous depravity by choosing to live righteously. Can you picture old Noah out there building this enormous ark with no sign of rain and no clouds in the sky? When no deluge had yet been witnessed on earth, Noah was probably made fun of for building a massive boat, but he didn't care. He simply responded to God's commands with a willing heart and hands. He continued to build the ark. And he constructed it precisely as God had instructed. God did not remove Noah from the flood, though. The flood still had to be endured by Noah and his family. Even still, they were forced to abandon their houses. They still had to part ways with others. And they had to live around animals, which probably was an unpleasant situation. For his righteousness and faithfulness, God rewarded Noah, sparing his family as well as himself from disaster. The tale of the flood also serves to highlight the assurance of His deliverance. God provides salvation for each of His believers through Christ, just as He did for Noah and his family.



For many years, the desert served as a location of trial, encounter, and rebirth for God's chosen people. The Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness after being set free from slavery in Egypt. This was viewed as a period of cleansing and getting ready to enter the promised land. Moses journeyed to the mountain of the Lord in the Sinai desert and spent 40 days and nights there fasting and praying. After receiving bread from heaven, Elijah travelled for 40 days through the wilderness to the mountain of God without eating. To be prepared for a specific mission from the Lord, both Moses and Elijah fasted for 40 days.

And all of this brings us forward to Jesus. Jesus spends forty days and forty nights in the desert without food or drink before beginning his public ministry. It isn't until after His fast, in His extreme human weakness that He encounters the devil's severe temptations. But Jesus relies on His Father and succeeds in the test. The devil didn't just accidentally bump into the Lord. This was a showdown between the Good and Bad. The Lord went into the wilderness purposefully, of course.

Jesus was tested again on the night of his arrest. Jesus invited his friends to pray with him in the Garden. He prayed, *"Father if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done."* Given that Jesus knew that his death was required, that prayer that was brave and sincere. But when Jesus realised that he would soon experience excruciating bodily anguish, he pleaded with God to remove the cup of death from him. Saying, *"Your will be done"* while life is more or less ordinary is one thing but to mean it when faced with so much pain, is another. With the words "not my will but yours be done" Jesus surrendered to what he was being called to. He chose to accept what God planned for him instead of holding onto his short-term preferences and hopes. Jesus demonstrates for us what it looks like to pass the test. He put his faith in his Father's will, he loved others more than himself and he confronted evil with good. Even though it resulted in his death. Jesus gave his life as a sacrifice to make up for all the failings of his followers and all

humanity. We too face our tests every day. Jesus said that each generation of his disciples would face unique trials that would need them to put their complete faith in God. And these tests are frequently challenging and uncomfortable. Just as the flood took Noah out of his comfort zone, these tests also force many of us to leave our comfort zones. But keep in mind that a test is an opportunity. James, a prominent figure in the early Church, said that therefore we should be thankful when we go through trials and tests because they offer us an opportunity (James 1:2-4) to submit to God's guidance and grow closer to the loving Jesus. Jesus can certainly relate to us in our weakness. When we pray in Jesus' name we have access to God who understands the kind of bodily frailty we experience, especially at times of personal weakness and anguish. Having faith in God during

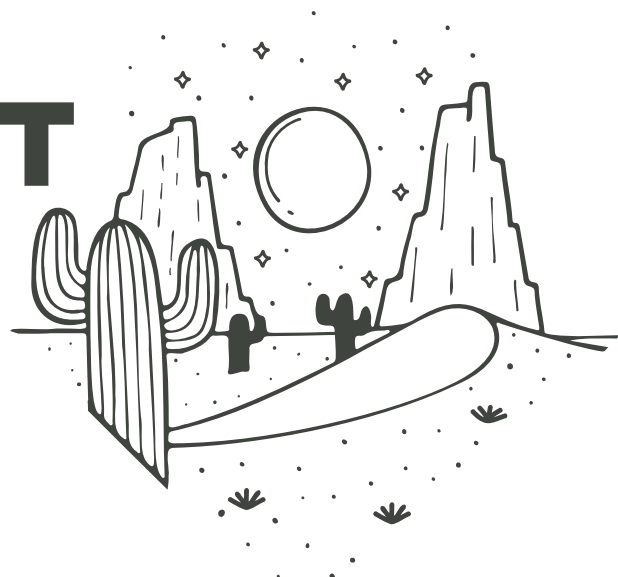
- • adversities means having faith in His purpose for our lives! These personalities from the Bible all had one
- • thing in common when it came to surviving their
- • hardships and life's storms. They believed in God and
- • followed His commands. They carried out what they
- • believed to be God's will, even when they could not
- • see the result.
- •
- • During this Lenten season, let us approach God as we are. He is already
- • aware of our vulnerability and what is happening in our life. So, let's give Him
- • all of our hearts and allow the Lord to carry out His work in us as He gets us
- • ready to serve in His Kingdom. May we grow to rely less on our own strength
- • and become more spiritually aware of our need for God.

Think about Moses and Elijah's trip through the wilderness. The holy mountain of God served as their destination. They arrived and waited.

(Spend some time in silence as you go through the following questions; then, share some of your reflections with the rest of the group)

- What is your purpose or destination in mind at present?
- Do you consider God's presence during your journey of life?
- What nourishes you on this life journey?
- How crucial is the Eucharist for spiritual nourishment?
- What are you waiting for at present?

DESERT

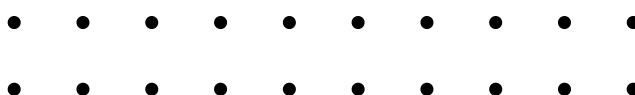


Have you ever been on a journey that took much longer than expected? This is what the Hebrews experienced in their journey from Egypt toward the Promised Land. A journey which could have taken less than a month lasted 40 years... in a desert!

Let us begin with reflecting on their experience in Egypt. The relationship between the Hebrews and the Egyptians had not always been ruptured, especially after a young man by the name of Joseph had helped Pharaoh govern over the nations during long years of drought. Nevertheless, succeeding the generations of Joseph, a new Pharaoh starts governing over Egypt who “did not know Joseph” (Ex 1:8); he does not remember God’s providence with both peoples in the past. Many interpretations of this text claim that he “did not know Joseph” not because of a lack of awareness of history, but because he wanted to forget such salvific history. And because of such forgetfulness, he then starts oppressing the Hebrews with hard work in construction and crop production (1:11-14), by killing all male Hebrew offspring (1:16), and by constraining their freedom to worship God (5:2). Let us look at the similarities between us and the Hebrews. We all have gone through phases of life in which everything seems to be going well, something changes, and then everything seems to start going downhill.

One of the very first things to be affected in times like these would be our relationship with God. We seem to be forgetful of God, not because we want to, but because many times hardship brings about alienation.

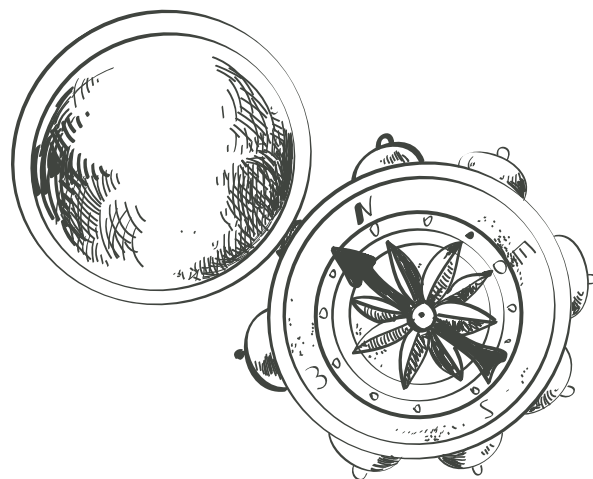
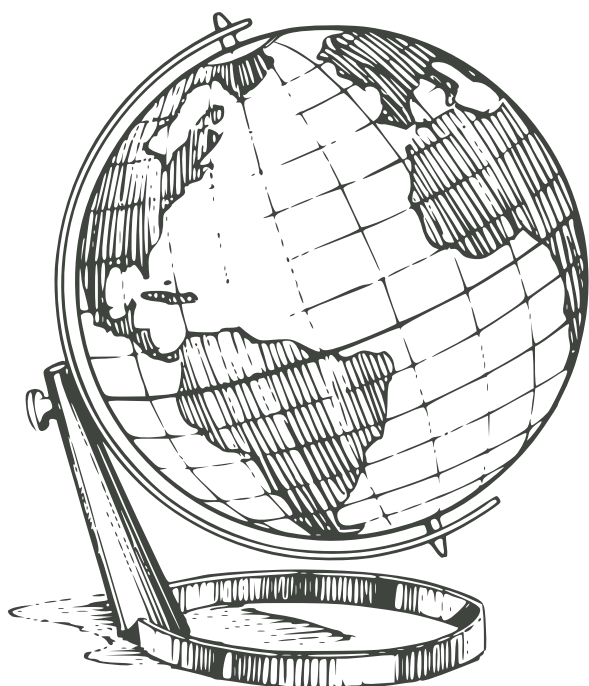
Amid such an experience, we do not have any recorded words coming out from the Hebrew’s lips. Yet, we have four noises expressing their sentiments: “The Israelites **groaned** in their slavery and **cried out**, and their **screams** because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their **moaning**...” (2:23-24). No verbalised words, yet very vivid emotions. We too might have experiences that we cannot express through language, yet emotions are very much at play. Language fails to express their pain; however, God does not fail to hear them. “God **heard** their groaning and he **remembered** his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God **looked** on the Israelites and was **concerned** about them” (2:24-25). Four reactions which He is surely engaged in today. Despite His silent presence, He is just the same hearing you, remembering his covenant with you, looking upon you, and is concerned about you.



Eventually, God calls Moses to advocate for freedom on behalf of the Hebrews in front of Pharaoh. Fast forward, and the Hebrews succeed in exiting the Egyptians' slavery. They are now on their way to the Promised Land in the desert.

There are journeys which we prefer more than others. A drive to work or school on a Monday morning is usually less pleasant than a drive to go somewhere with friends on a Friday evening. We can only imagine the joy of initiating the journey of freedom from Egypt. No wonder the Hebrews start singing! Here we have one of the very first songs of praise to be recorded in the Bible. A few days pass, and such praise is then transformed into grumbling. The Hebrews were hungry, and so, they grumbled. They were thirsty, and so, they grumbled. They were then eating the same food day after day, and they continued to grumble to the point that they also claimed that it would have been better for them to remain enslaved in Egypt rather than experience hunger in the desert.

And for every complaint, God provides water, manna, and quail.



Despite everything, God remains looking after his beloved. He remains loving not because of the Hebrews' behaviour, but because of His very own nature of love. Being a good father, He does not hold his love for his ever-failing children.

A relationship, however, is always composed of two or more people. The Hebrews lose multiple opportunities to reciprocate their love for God and to sustain their relationship with Him. They have physically exited Egypt, yet their hearts remained enslaved. Are we turning our hearts in the right directions of living? Are we allowing ourselves to seek life in its fullness and not remain enslaved? What is the desert? The desert is every area in our life in which there is no life. And in our own lives, we may realise several areas in which life is not present, for instance, fears, anxieties, sickness, relational problems, addiction ... And when we lack life, what shall we do? We should search for it!

This Lent, we are invited to seek life in its fullness by **turning our complaints into a prayer**. The Hebrews complained about a lot of things with God; yet, they never stopped to appreciate His very own presence.

Imagine if your best friend would only come next to you to make his/her requests from you. He/she would want something from you this day, another piece of work the day after... and after years of requests from you, you realise that he/she never stops to simply spend time with you. Just imagine. Imagine how God feels if we always draw near to Him simply to put forward our requests without ever enjoying time with Him. Let us turn our complaints into prayer. Not prayer of requests, but simply a conversation between two friends. Share your life with Him, and let Him share His through the Gospels.

Let us conclude by reflecting on a Psalm that we have heard countless times in our life:

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the right paths for his name's sake.”

What do we notice so far? It's David speaking about God. From now onwards, something is going to change: *“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil: for **You are with me.**”* At first, David starts speaking **about** God, “He makes me... He leads me... He restores...” As soon as the valley of the shadow of death approaches, David starts speaking **to** God, not just about Him. Such a valley could have easily brought about grumbling. Yet, David turns his complaint into a heartfelt prayer.



During this Lent, may we – like David – come to turn our eyes towards God in times of desert and darkest valleys. May we no longer remain speaking about God as if He is a foreigner but start speaking to Him in a heartfelt manner.

(Spend some time in silence as you go through the following questions; then, share some of your reflections with the rest of the group)

- Are there any troubling experiences in your life right now which make it difficult to voice the emotions you are currently feeling?
- If you had to describe your life at present in one emotion, what would it be?
- What areas in your life do you consider a desert?
- Are there any past experiences you have come out of (just as the Hebrews were delivered from Egypt) to which you have words of praise to God?
- Which complaint do you consider an opportunity to translate into a prayer?

ISAIAH 40

In many ways, the period of Lent traces its roots to “*the mystery of Jesus in the Desert*”. Similarly, in this passage, Isaiah speaks to a people who had been deserted from their land for many years. You could say that these people were in a desert too. This Lent, many years later, how can Isaiah’s words speak to us?

Lent can be regarded as capturing all those moments in our lives which make us feel estranged from God. During Lent, God is awaited – He is ‘present but not’ at the same time. In our lives, God’s non-presence can take on several forms.

- Maybe we have not discovered God yet, and so God feels foreign to us.
- Maybe we have discovered God but suddenly don’t feel his presence as strongly.
- Or maybe we are living a kind of life that rejects God.

Amidst this estrangement, Isaiah encourages the people to not lose heart in God’s love and faithfulness. Sometimes, undoubtedly, this is not that easy for us to do, but Isaiah reminds us that **God does not grow tired like humans, and no problem is hidden from God or is too much for Him to handle**. Amid our moments of confusion, of doubt, of dryness, or of pain, we are invited to open ourselves to experience the infinite love that God has for us. How can Lent help us do this?

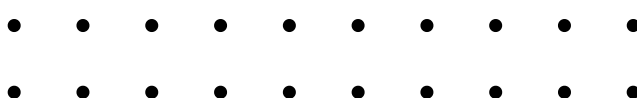


Isaiah speaks of plains being “levelled” and of mountains being “flattened”... What do these images symbolise? They symbolise all that is in the way, between us and Jesus. I ask myself, what, in my life right now, needs to be levelled down for me to be able to experience God’s love more (i.e. to prepare the way for the Lord)?

This idea of preparing the way for the Lord might sound daunting. How much effort do I have to make? Is it all up to me?

The good news is that, with God things never depend only on us. He is always the one to take the first step! God is already inviting you into deeper friendship with Him – we simply need to try to reciprocate in the ways that we can. Thus, for example:

- If we don't know God personally yet, we can try to search more genuinely and with a more open heart.
- If we've known God but are not feeling him much at the moment, we can try to remind ourselves of His faithfulness and love – asking him to help us be faithful even during the dark times.



- If we are living a life that is rejecting Him, we can try to ask him to help us grow in love and in self-discipline, while engaging in acts of alms-giving and fasting!

Sometimes, all it takes to “prepare the way” is to give God “permission” to work in us. God will not impose himself, so we need to show Him that we want to be transformed! The slightest effort on our part can bear much fruit!

In this light, it is good to note that all the changes that Isaiah speaks of are in the **spiritual life**: valleys, crooked places, ridges and so on, these are all sinful things; problems in our life that need to be straightened out. Our distraction – our tendency to heal our anxiety with superficial things – our failure to go out of our way to help others – our propensity to waste time, the list goes on.

Ultimately, this growth is a journey; a journey that cannot take place without **hope**.



In the third part of the passage, the Prophet upgrades his poetic skills. Flesh changes and dies like grass (simile), he says, “its beauty like that of flowers cannot last”. Isaiah reminds us that there is no long-term comfort in mortal flesh – in things that are in the world.

These comparisons show the fading and transitory nature of human lives and of anything natural. Humans fail, we also die. But this contrasts with the love of God that cannot fail and that never doubts. This is where true hope is rooted. This kind of hope isn’t optimism – for optimism can potentially deceive us – rather, it is a realistic hope rooted in solid foundations – in a kind of love that never stops loving.

In waiting for the Lord to be reborn in us at Easter, we long for the fulfillment of a promise by faith. This is a longing that is characterized by confident expectation. Here, our longing is ‘active’ because of our hope. Hence, the prophet writes that those who hope in the Lord soar like eagles... they walk without tiring. Is this how we often feel? The question is, in our life, what are we primarily rooting our hope in?

Naturally, in our life we trust and wait on many things! We wait for job interviews, for new album releases, for exam results, for the night to pass.

Our life is in part a life of waiting. But it isn't and shouldn't be a life of **passive waiting** – or of only waiting for things that will fulfil us only for a short time. We're not made for short-term fulfilment! In one of his novels, the Polish novelist Joseph Conrad contrasts the human being to a butterfly. Whereas a butterfly, at some point or another, successfully finds the branch or rock to rest upon; the human being never stays still for a long period of time. We are restless, always searching, always desiring new and more things. We never stop and say, "there's nothing else I want!". Joy is different from hunger, which we can satisfy at some point – joy seems infinite.

Amidst all this, how can we better **understand** all this restlessness that pushes us to search and want more? This uneasiness is not something we should get rid of; rather, it is something we need to interpret and understand. Restlessness is a sign – showing us that we need to always strive for a better life – for a **fuller life**.

In one of her reflections, St Theresa of Avila compares the human soul to a "castle" that has many rooms and many stories. The deeper we travel inside, the closer we get to God. The last room is God's room in us. In it, our self and God meet! But in order to travel deeper, in order to get to this last room, our paths need to be all clear. This is what lies at the heart of Lent! The task of making ourselves clearer to discover who we are and to, in turn, discover Jesus within!



This is a journey that takes time; a journey that features a personal relationship; a journey that generates hope; and a hope that blooms into love. As the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, *"hope holds to Christ the mind's own mirror out, To take His lovely likeness more and more"*

(Spend some time in silence as you go through the following questions; then, share some of your reflections with the rest of the group)

- Take a moment to reflect upon your desires. Are you feeling restless somehow?
- In the reflection above, we observed how restlessness can be a sign. How do you usually deal with this uneasiness? Do you let it be of guidance?
- St Augustine once wrote, *"you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."* Take a moment to reflect upon this.

PSALM 40

The psalms are fascinating because, in them, we can see the heart, the thought, and the community of the person who is writing them. They are a window for us to see what the people were thinking and feeling. In this knowledge, Psalm 40 is realistic because the author takes us on a roller-coaster of different realities and emotions.

*"I waited patiently for the Lord;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God."*

The psalmist, as we can see, begins with praise and gratitude to God because when he was in the mire and mud, - places where he felt stuck, unable to move, and where no one could help him - God came down and heard his cry. The author gives testimony to all who are listening to him. In other words, he tells them, "I know that God is real because he saved me." The circumstance of slime and mud, in our lives, can refer to psychological reality, moments of sadness, or perhaps some particular sin. The Lord can get us out of all this. God not only freed the author but frees us still, because now our feet are firm, where there is no more trouble but only thanksgiving: "and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure."

During this Lent, what can we thank God for? What is that situation in our life that God rescued us from and got us out of its mind?

If we are confused right now because maybe we cannot identify a moment of gratitude, then we can present this mud and silt that we still feel stuck in.

David does not stop with thanksgiving, but offers his disposition to do God's will:

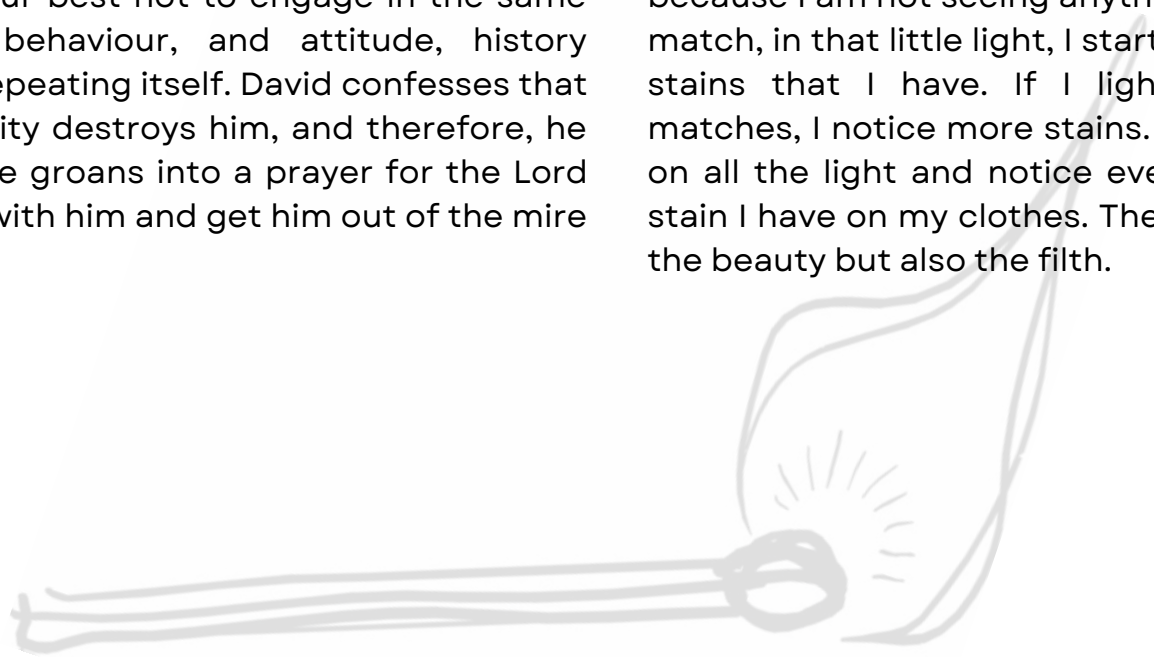
*"Here I am;
in the scroll of the book it is written of me.
I delight to do your will, O my God;
your law is within my heart."*

What law is he referring to? It is the truth that God loves us. And in this reality, we find the purpose of the psalm. Up to this point, David feels so grateful to God for the fact that He loves him so much. Knowing that God heard him does not mean that he will always give David what he wants, but it means that God is always with him.

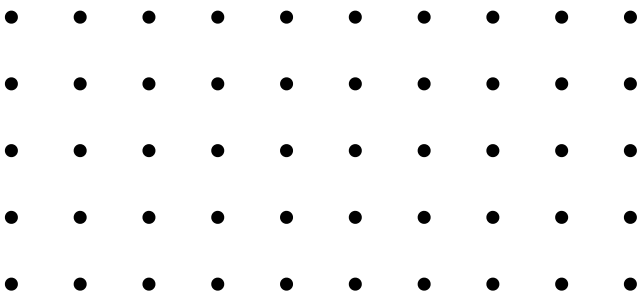


In another Psalm (56), the psalmist says, “This I know, that God is for me.” In other words, we understand that whatever we go through, whatever our emotion is, whatever our failures or successes are, we know one thing, that God is with us. With this sentiment, David in Psalm 40 makes a slight change in the tonality from a sense of thanksgiving and praise to one of groaning. This groan seems to come from a place of sin or weakness creating tension in himself. Many times we also experience similar realities that limit us: the sins and weaknesses of our lives that, even though we do our best not to engage in the same words, behaviour, and attitude, history keeps repeating itself. David confesses that this reality destroys him, and therefore, he turns the groans into a prayer for the Lord to stay with him and get him out of the mire again.

And so this psalm orients us into two realities: the moments of gratitude in our lives and moments of heaviness in which we need the Lord to rescue us from them and defend us. If there is one thing that is clear about David, is that he certainly had no problem recognising his sin. Perhaps we have sometimes heard of those who say that they have no sin, and perhaps sometimes we also feel that way. In these moments we recognise that we are not exposed enough to light. If I go into a dark room and take a look at what I am wearing, I do not see anything wrong with myself because I am not seeing anything. If I light a match, in that little light, I start to see some stains that I have. If I light two more matches, I notice more stains. Finally, I turn on all the light and notice every mark and stain I have on my clothes. The light reveals the beauty but also the filth.



In this time of Lent, we are called to approach Jesus, the true light, through whom we can recognise the sin that stains us. But Jesus does not stop there. God, even through our weakness, also shows us His love. Sin is not simply a phase to beat ourselves for or feel bad in. It is the exact opposite. There is a new knowledge that, despite these blemishes and our weaknesses, there is someone who will always love us. “This I know, that God is for me.” And if God is with us, God loves us! We can enter a safe environment that allows us to recognise our limitations and unwanted attitudes.

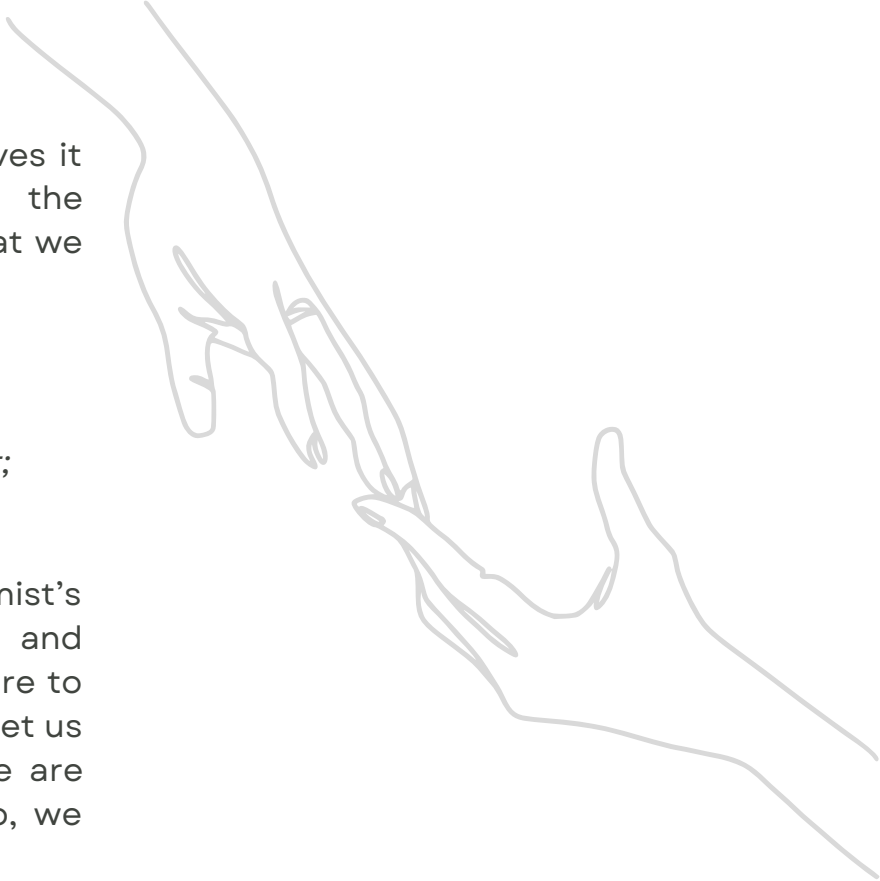


When we admit something to ourselves it does not make us less loved; on the contrary, it allows us to recognise that we are loved by God more than ever.

Psalm 40 closes with this verse:

*"You are my help and my deliverer;
do not delay, O my God."*

This is a cry so that among the psalmist's limitations, God stays with him and continues to love him. And so, if we are to enter into a process during this Lent, let us enter deeper into this truth: that we are truly loved and loved always. And so, we need Him.



(Spend some time in silence as you go through the following questions; then, share some of your reflections with the rest of the group)

- If you had to identify 3 things you are grateful for, what would they be?
- If you had to identify 3 things in you feel stuck in, what would they be?
- Am I exposed enough to light to be aware of my own sins? How can I allow more light enter into my life?
- *"When we admit something to ourselves it does not make us less loved; on the contrary, it allows us to recognise that we are loved by God more than ever."* How do you feel about this?

FORTY AND MORE

Have you ever been involved in an event or a party, which takes weeks to organise, and then is over in just a few hour, and the next day is 'business as usual'? Or have you ever been on a diet, looking forward to a cheat day, and the next day you find it difficult to start again? For most of us, this is the way we celebrate Easter. 40 days of sacrifice and waiting, until the celebration of Easter. The next day, however, should not be 'business as usual'!

The Christian enters a 40-day advent, to celebrate 50 days of Easter. Our joy should heal the expectancy during Lent. Easter is not just Easter Sunday... on the contrary, every day until Pentecost should be Easter Sunday: the joy born from the hope that death does not have the last word; that the waves of life are not greater than God... that despite his hiding, God is with us again.

Some of us celebrate Christmas or Lent with great fondness; but if it weren't for Easter, we would not be celebrating Christmas or Lent. In other words, Saint Paul says that "if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." (1 Cor 15:14).

It is the feast of feasts during which we can embrace our crosses: not to beat ourselves up, but in order to recognise that our cross is always temporary. Before our cross, there was another cross that was not conquered, because life won.

And so, these fifty days should be a discovery of our identity: that you and I are Easter people who sow and seek hope and life wherever we are.

Easter is my feast and yours, whomever you are and wherever you are. If today these words pass over our heads like a thousand other words we hear, and we do not find hope in them because we remain afraid, alone, in sin, and with all kinds of suffering... Easter is still your feast! Easter is the surprising experience of twelve frightened people locked in a room even though they have been close to Christ for years. It is the experience of Emmaus: the God who walks with two people who, despite their admiration, have lost faith in God and in the Church. It's the experience of millions of people who believed in Christ despite of Church's perpetual mistakes.

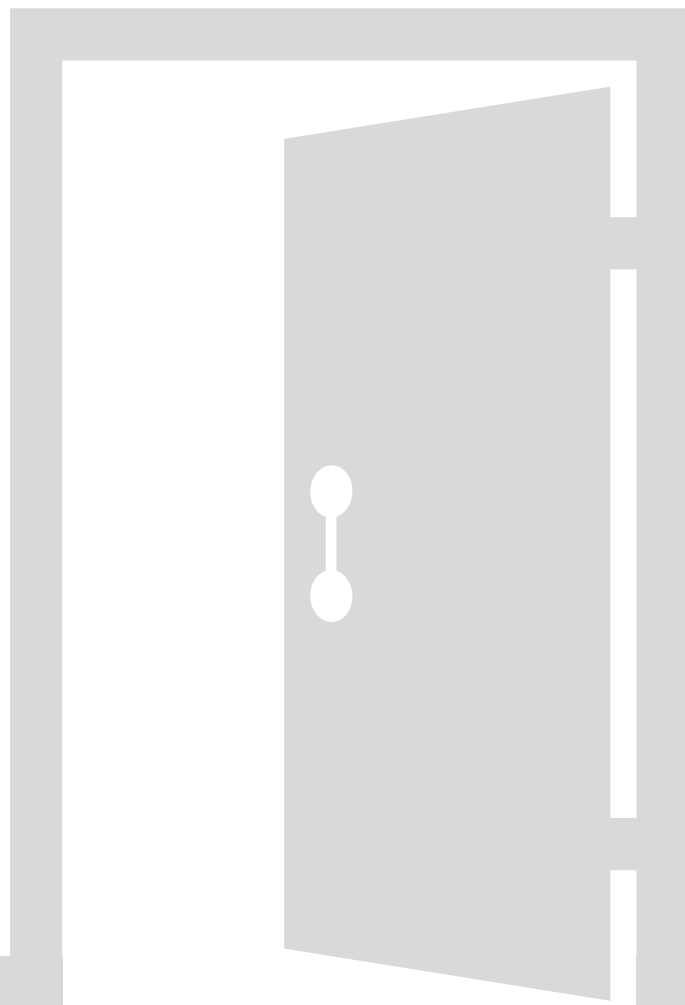
If Christ had not risen from the dead, our faith would be futile.



Lent begins with ashes, and Easter ends with fire. Reverse effect. From ashes to fire; from death to life. Renewal. This is your celebration. A celebration because suffering, vices, pain, and sin, do not have the last word.

Easter ends with fire, the descent of the life-giving spirit on a frightened community. Let these fifty days be an advent for the life-giving spirit. The Spirit takes you out of the closed rooms, the escape from the Church, the words of hope that we do not resonate with. Do not remain in Lent but be open to the Spirit who gives life.

**Because Christ rose from the dead,
our faith is whole.**



(Spend some time in silence as you go through the following questions; then, share some of your reflections with the rest of the group)

- How do you celebrate Easter? Do you feel that it is your biggest feast?
- After hearing this reflection, is there anything which you would consider changing in the way you celebrate Easter?
- Have you ever felt like the disciples locked in a room with fear or like the disciples of Emmaus not feeling part of the rest of the community/Church?
- How important is the Holy Spirit in your prayer life?

Let us conclude this session with a short and simple prayer: **Come Holy Spirit!**