

## Introduction

We have all just come through a year like no other in living memory, and now we have arrived in a new year, carrying all the hopes and dreams of a new beginning, but also the many fears and troubles of the year just passed. The season of Lent gives us a heaven-sent opportunity to reflect prayerfully on our recent experience and the difficulties and the possibilities it has set before us. Last year, 2020 challenged us individually and collectively, in ways no-one could have imagined. It has confronted us with the question of whether we want to go back to how things were, or to 'grow back better'. It has challenged us to reflect on what kind of people we truly desire to become and what kind of world we hope to pass on to future generations.

Each of us has our own personal role to play in the great story of transformation. 'Transformation', we might well think, is not for us little people. Saints and heroes do transformation, not humble pilgrims on a rocky road. Actually the very opposite is the truth. Transformation happens, one pilgrim at a time, step by painful step, precisely on the rocky roads of life. The Gospel gives us both a vision and a map for this journey.

We could see the experience of 2020 as a particularly difficult stile we have had to climb, as we move from the field of all that is past to the field of all that we can become. If we go over this stile and embrace this invitation to transformation, we will discover that the path leads us first through the kind of upheaval we are all experiencing in our times, but also holds out the promise of a very new and different tomorrow. Upheaval, it turns out, is the catalyst for change. In the beginning, we recall, the Spirit hovered not over order but over chaos, bringing forth a new creation.

We are making this journey personally, but we are also making it together as the human family. However I would like to introduce you to a particular fellow pilgrim who will be accompanying us on our Lenten journey this year. You may already be very familiar with him, or perhaps you may never have heard of him. It doesn't matter – he won't hold that against you. His name is Ignatius Loyola, but during this retreat we will refer to him simply as Inigo. Inigo fought his own battles with the challenge of transformation, half a millennium ago, and he was inspired to make notes about his inner journey with its many gifts and graces, but also its times of temptation and despair. These notes formed the basis of his Spiritual Exercises. What is not always realised is that Inigo was a lay person when he was making this momentous, and ultimately world-changing journey and formulating his Exercises. They have guided many millions of spiritual searchers through the intervening ages and they resonate deeply and remarkably with 21st century psychology and spirituality.

The first thing Inigo would want to tell us is this: 'Don't follow me. Follow the One I follow'. Ignatian spirituality is completely Christ-centred and Gospel-guided. It gives us a kind of spiritual toolkit to help us make the Gospel journey in very practical, accessible ways. We will be using this toolkit extensively during our retreat. It opens up ways of reflecting on where we find ourselves in our relationship with God, and how we might begin to walk more closely in the footsteps of Jesus, learning from him, like apprentices, seeking to internalise his values and wisdom into our own lives. The journey will take us, as it did him, into the darkest places of Holy Week and then beyond them to the joy of a new dawn at Easter. Above all it will ask us the searching question:

'What is Love asking of you now, in the place, time and circumstances in which you find yourself?' As you take these issues into prayer Inigo would urge you to shape a daily prayer routine that works for you, and includes:

- Reflecting on what you are asking of God today – what gift or grace do you especially seek? Jesus once asked a blind man: 'What do you want me to do for you? (Luke 18:41). The blind man asked that he might see again. Think about how you would respond to this question yourself. Perhaps you too are seeking clearer vision in some aspect of your life?
- Taking some time each day (perhaps 10-15 minutes) to look back over how the day has been. This form of prayer is often called the Examen, or simply Review of the Day and Inigo urged his companions never to neglect it even if they had no time for any other form of prayer. This isn't a blow-by-blow re-run of the day, but simply a matter of relaxing into God's presence and recalling what has most moved you, challenged you, disturbed or consoled you. Where has God been in the day's events? For what are you most grateful? Is there anything that, on reflection, you wish you had done differently, or not done at all? Simply bring it all into prayer, without judging yourself, or anyone else, and ask for the light of the Holy Spirit to show you whatever God wants you to see.

As you spend time with the scripture text suggested for each session, use any form of prayer that helps you – perhaps the prayer of the listening heart (*lectio divina*), or perhaps imagining yourself present at a particular scene (*imaginative meditation*) and opening your heart to whatever God wishes to reveal to you.

As you journey, you might also find it helpful to keep your own notes, in the form of a journal or diary, noting what is especially firing your heart and capturing your attention, what grace the week has brought you and how you have been challenged or encouraged. This doesn't have to be a work of literature – in fact it shouldn't be – but just your own honest feelings about where your prayer is leading you. Some people may prefer to do this using a sketchpad and images instead of words. It is a maxim of Ignatian spirituality to use whatever helps you to come closer to God, and leave aside anything that is not helpful.

May these weeks of Lent lead us all ever closer to God, to each other and to all God's creatures, and to the deep and sacred source of our own being.