



BRF Lent Book

AT HOME IN LENT

An exploration
of Lent through
46 objects

Gordon Giles

Includes group
discussion questions

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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Contents

Introduction	7
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ASH WEDNESDAY TO SATURDAY

Ash Wednesday – Door	10
Thursday – Threshold	13
Friday – Fireplace	16
Saturday – Mobile phone.....	20

WEEK ONE

First Sunday of Lent – Mirror	24
Monday – Keys.....	28
Tuesday – Safe.....	32
Wednesday – Hat	35
Thursday – Baggage.....	39
Friday – Wardrobe.....	43
Saturday – Best clothes	47

WEEK TWO

Second Sunday of Lent – Shoes	51
Monday – Clock	54
Tuesday – Wristwatch	58
Wednesday – Toilet	61
Thursday – Shower	65
Friday – Bath	68
Saturday – Toothbrush	71

WEEK THREE

Third Sunday of Lent – Spectacles.....	75
Monday – Bathroom scales	79
Tuesday – Washing machine	83
Wednesday – Vacuum cleaner	87
Thursday – Fridge-freezer.....	91
Friday – Kettle	95
Saturday – Electricity.....	99

WEEK FOUR

Mothering Sunday – Family photos	103
Monday – Keepsakes	107
Tuesday – Calendar.....	111
Wednesday – Radio.....	115
Thursday – Television	119
Friday – Computer	122
Saturday – Pen	126

WEEK FIVE

Passion Sunday – The Bible.....	130
Monday – Piano.....	134
Tuesday – Night light	138
Wednesday – Curtains	141
Thursday – Salt shaker	145
Friday – Dining table	149
Saturday – Chair.....	153

HOLY WEEK

Palm Sunday – Newspaper.....	157
Holy Monday – Bills.....	161
Holy Tuesday – Purse.....	165

Holy Wednesday – Towel	169
Maundy Thursday – Alarm clock	172
Good Friday – Crucifix	176
Holy Saturday – Bed	180

EPILOGUE

Easter Day and every day – Dazzling light	184
Discussion questions	188

Introduction

Is your home your spiritual castle? The origins of the proverb ‘An Englishman’s home is his castle’ date back to the 16th century, when in 1581 Henri Estienne’s *The Stage of Popish Toyes: conteining both tragicall and comicall partes*, stated that ‘youre house is youre Castell’, and in the same year Richard Mulcaster, the headmaster of the Merchant Taylor’s School in London, wrote, ‘He [the householder] is the appointer of his owne circumstance, and his house is his castle.’ Seventy years later, the lawyer and politician Sir Edward Coke established the idea in law in *The Institutes of the Laws of England* (1628): ‘For a man’s house is his castle, *et domus sua cuique est tutissimum refugium* [and one’s home is one’s safest refuge].’ Another century later and none other than William Pitt the Elder said in Parliament, ‘The poorest man may in his cottage bid defiance to all the forces of the crown. It may be frail – its roof may shake – the wind may blow through it – the storm may enter – the rain may enter – but the King of England cannot enter.’ The concept has carried across the seas to other lands too, notably to the USA, where in 1800 Joel Chandler Harris adapted the maxim, writing, ‘Exalt the citizen. As the State is the unit of government, he is the unit of the State. Teach him that his home is his castle, and his sovereignty rests beneath his hat.’

Notwithstanding the modern right of the police and bailiffs to force their way into premises with the necessary warrant or court order, we generally believe and behave as though our homes are private and open only to those whom we invite in. In our homes, we flee from the presence of all but our nearest and dearest. While for some it can be a place of domestic violence, treachery or strife, for many the home is a sanctuary, a safe haven and the place where not only our hearts but also our belongings are housed. Increasingly, we have more and more possessions, and our homes are becoming warehouses for

objects whose use, meaning and significance varies widely. It is said that nature abhors a vacuum; in modern times this means that no matter how big your home is, it will likely be full of stuff!

This book seeks to cross the threshold of the Christian home. By all means read it on the train, but its desire is to be invited in and its purpose is to snoop around and ask nosy questions about the things you have in your home. If we feel that our homes are our castles, open only to those we wish to invite in, then this book stands at the door knocking as a friend, a divine friend, even. For, as the psalmist reminds us, there is no place where we can flee from the presence of God:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
 if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light around me become night,'
even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

PSALM 139:1–12

Against the temptation to hide or flee from the Lord, this book of daily readings comes as an invitation to discover how he is already in our homes and as a map of where to seek and find God in the fixtures, fittings and other items with which we surround ourselves at home. Inspired by Neil MacGregor's 2010 BBC Radio 4 series *The History of the World in 100 Objects*, this book seeks to open access to the spiritual significance of 46 objects that can be found in almost any home. Our biblical ancestors did not have anything like as much 'stuff' as we do, but some of the things we possess have long histories, while other modern gadgets and household paraphernalia have something to say to us about the world in which we live and move and have our being, and about the God from whom all art and science comes. For the way we live is a spiritual as well as a practical matter, and under God it is good to reflect on the things we take so much for granted.

The Holy Spirit of God is everywhere and in everything, if we only look with the right eyes and a humble frame of mind. During Lent, we are called to read and reflect, to be penitent and patient, and to journey towards the renewing light of the Easter dawn. When Easter comes in seven weeks, it is my hope and prayer for you, gentle reader, that the journey around your home will cast Passiontide and Easter in a different hue, and that the Lord will have been with you in everything, and everywhere.

Ash Wednesday

Door

Behold, I stand and knock

‘Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.’

REVELATION 3:20-22

Have you ever paid any attention to your front door? The lock on mine broke recently, and then I suddenly became very interested in how it works, whether it would work and whether I would actually end up locked in or locked out. The little button on the catch broke off, and I lost confidence in the security, safety and convenience of a door that is opened and closed at least a dozen times a day. So I went to a locksmith and bought a new door lock, and then had some adventures getting the old one off and replacing it. All the while I was aware that if I were to make a mistake then the security of my family and possessions could be jeopardised. However holy-minded or spiritually aloof one tries to be about one’s stuff, in the end we do worry about these things and in a modern society do need to be wary of risk and realistic about personal safety and valuables.

A front door is not just for keeping people out, of course; it is also for letting them in! As a parish vicar, I frequently open my door to people and have more visitors than most. Occasionally I have visitors who I don’t want to, or should not, let in. I learnt the hard way to be at least a little wary. A stranger at the door invited himself in, and it turned

out he was a violent criminal who wanted money. I had to give him some to make him leave, but I suppose he may have needed it. We all get unwelcome visitors from time to time, selling, buying, conning or manipulating, and we have to engage in that ongoing inner dialogue: 'Are they genuine? What is the real cost of mistakenly giving them something as opposed to shutting the door on real need?' It is better to be conned a bit than to contribute to someone's ongoing suffering.

When we read the words of Christ as heard by John in this passage from Revelation, they conjure up images of Jesus on our doorstep, knocking on a door that we have locked from the inside and only we can open. He does not batter the door or break it down. We may wonder whether he comes as stranger or friend. The artist William Holman Hunt (1827–1910), who lies buried in St Paul's Cathedral, painted many religious works, but the most famous is undoubtedly *The Light of the World*, of which there are several versions of various sizes. The largest one, which went on a world tour because it was so popular, now stands in the Middlesex Chapel of St Paul's, where it forms a backdrop to daily prayer. Sadly, it is poorly lit and not easy to attend to in detail, but the figure of Christ holding a lantern and knocking on a wooden door is clear enough. Momentary study reveals that the door has no handle: it can only be opened from within. The door is the door to our hearts, and knock as loudly as he might, only we can open the door and let Christ in.

It may be a sentimental picture, beloved of the Victorians and easy to feel warm inside about, but the metaphor can be pushed a little when we think of the front doors of our own homes. Generally, our doors are not merely closed; they are locked. Thus, to open them is a two-stage process. That also assumes that our door has oiled hinges, is unobstructed and that the lock works; that is, as well as our wanting to open the door, it must be physically possible to do so. For, like my vicarage door with the broken lock, our spiritual doors must be maintained and cared for. Generally, we don't pay attention to things until they break, but maintenance is vital. This, in a deep sense, is what this season of Lent is all about.

As we enter Lent, a period of penitence, self-reflection and self-denial, we may also like to think of it as a time for spiritual maintenance. It can be a seven-week period for making sure that we truly are 'at home' to Jesus, that the door of our hearts is open and that the rest of our spiritual home is in good working order. The word 'Lent' derives from the Old English for 'spring', and we all know about spring cleaning, whether we do it or not! Lent is a good period for spiritual spring cleaning too. As the days unfold between now and Easter, when we shall welcome the risen Lord, my invitation to you is to look around your home and consider its furnishings and fittings, and in doing so to reflect upon the furnishings and fittings of our faith. They may need polishing, repairing, sprucing up or even replacing. Furthermore, the objects of our daily lives are always with us, and we readily overlook, ignore or take them for granted. Yet they may serve as a constant reminder of our pilgrimage of faith, and we can learn to see them in a new light, enabling us to reflect afresh on God's world and our place in it.

As Lent begins, let us look around our homes in a new, spiritually creative and reflective way. And remember, today especially, that the place to start is the front door, which can be a metaphorical doorway into the period of Lent, as well as the door we open to let Christ in, so that he can rule our hearts and lead us forward in faith and hope and love.

Lord Jesus, you stand at the threshold of every heart and seek the welcome of an open door. As our doorbells invite us to welcome friends and strangers alike, may we also invite and welcome you as a permanent guest into our lives. Amen

Thursday

Threshold

Invited in

A woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that [Jesus] was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner.'... Then turning towards the woman, [Jesus] said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.'

LUKE 7:37–39, 44–46

Yesterday, we thought about the front door and how Christ knocks on it (or rings the bell), either as friend or stranger. Visitors to our homes knock on the door. Sometimes they come by arrangement, sometimes they drop by, but either way they stand on the doormat. Before any conversation, table fellowship or other activity can take place within the home, they must cross the threshold.

Traditionally, a bridegroom would carry his bride across the threshold. The origins of this practice are veiled in history, but one

theory is that it derives from a fear of demons at the door who would bring bad luck if the bride tripped as she entered, and therefore she was picked up and carried in. Nowadays this is just a bit of fun, although the notion of luck is still strongly associated with marriage. Moreover, the idea that demons lurk at the door is found in the ancient tradition of blessing the home at Epiphany by chalking the initials of the magi – CMB (Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar) – on the door or doorframe. This itself reminds us of that ancient and deadly door danger, when the Israelites were told to daub the Passover lamb's blood on the doorposts to avoid the killing of their firstborn:

Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin. None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning. For the Lord will pass through to strike down the Egyptians.

EXODUS 12:22-23

Orthodox Jews today still put scriptures on their doorposts as a sign and reminder of whose law those in the house live by.

Being welcomed into a house by the resident is a privilege so often taken for granted. Cultural norms may encourage us to take a gift when visiting (although never to expect one!). We would expect the host to offer to hang up our coat, and we may remove our shoes for the sake of the carpets. In Jesus' day, the greeting at a door was followed by foot washing, as the famous encounter with the woman who wiped his feet with her hair reveals. Nowadays, we do not wash guests' feet or pour oil on them, but we might well kiss, hug or shake hands with them as soon as they have crossed the threshold. Not doing so might be considered rude and unwelcoming.

The threshold, often marked by a doormat inside and/or outside the actual door, is the place of welcome. Indeed, 'welcome' or some other warm greeting is often written on the doormat. As people enter our home, they are welcomed into our place of safety, in which we

may take some pride, or perhaps feel shame. There are people who do not invite others into their homes because they are ashamed of how untidy or dirty it is. Others say, 'You find it as it is', and focus on the companionship of being visited.

Yet, as Simon the Pharisee was to discover, inviting people across the threshold is to court judgement. It exposes us to criticism, voiced or not, and makes us vulnerable, through the potential for report and gossip. Simon has gone down in history as the man who did not properly welcome Jesus, and who received strong criticism from his guest. It is the same for us, for while Christ stands and knocks (as we saw yesterday), if we let him in, we let in not only light but also judgement. So, if we do that at the beginning of Lent, we are exposing ourselves to the recognition that we stand judged before our Lord, who in love and mercy will look around our spiritual home and point out the errors of our ways, the dirty corners and the neglected nooks and crannies of our conscience. If we let Christ across our threshold in Lent, he will, we hope, lead us to see the faults in our faith. Yet he will not judge and leave, but dwell with us as constant guide and guardian. For we, as Jesus said:

have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

JOHN 15:3-5

This is to be reminded that without Christ we can do nothing. But if we let him across the thresholds of our lives, he will walk with us to the end of our days and beyond.

Father God, as we look forward to spring and Easter, help us prepare to welcome the risen Christ by self-examination, honest reflection and creative engagement with your word and the world. Amen



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