



## On the Easter path

Joseph Simmons SJ

At the beginning of Lent, Pope Francis asked us in his Ash Wednesday homily to think about where we are heading on the journey of life. Formed by our Lenten discipline and with Easter eyes, we now hope to be able to see more clearly the contours of that journey, for ourselves and others, says Joseph Simmons SJ. ‘No matter where we are in life, we are always somewhere on the Easter path.’

My childhood had many grand traditions. One of them was that every year on our birthdays, Grandma Giebel would take each grandchild out to lunch and then to the local shop to get a huge box of sweets – a pincer attack on our poor parents. When I was about eight I discovered Sour Patch Kids. They were sweet and chewy; but a sour jolt waged with sugar for my tongue’s attention. Sour Patch Kids were a new and complex taste, at least for a child’s palate, and I grew to love them.

As an adult I don’t eat many sweets anymore. But a childlike joy hits me whenever I come across a marvellous new word. Brain candy, of a sort. Not long ago I came across the word ‘camber’, which is the angled pitch of a tyre, or a road surface, to facilitate a vehicle’s safe turning. We encounter camber at every banked curve in the road, or whenever the train lists gently to one side on a bend in the tracks. Racecar tyres are cambered to prevent outer tyres from wearing too quickly, and from sending cars spiralling off the pavement. Camber, in its many forms, makes the bends on life’s journeys smoother and safer.

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Early Christians in Acts 24:14 called themselves followers of ‘the Way’ – *hē ‘odōs* – which also means ‘road’. In John 14:6, Jesus calls himself ‘the way, the truth, and the life’. Over the days of Lent, we have attempted to follow Christ more intentionally in our lives. At the end of this journey, it may be helpful to

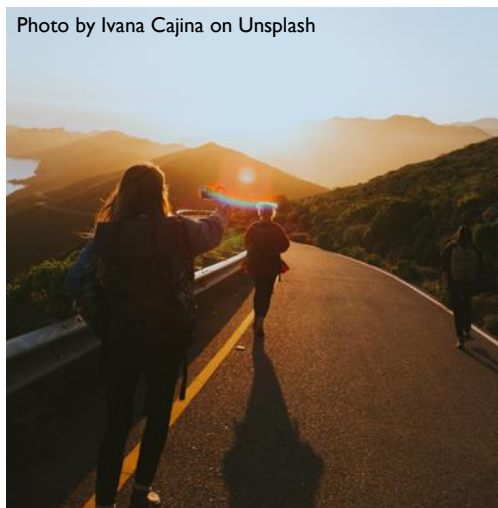


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recall [Pope Francis’ Ash Wednesday homily](#) this year. In it he offered an examination of how we are doing as followers of Christ, the Way:

On the journey of life, do I seek the way forward? Or am I satisfied with living in the moment and thinking only of feeling good, solving some problems, and having fun? What is the path? Is it the search for health, which many today say comes first but which eventually passes? Could it be possessions and wellbeing? But we

are not in the world for this. Return to me, says the Lord. To me. The Lord is the goal of our journey in this world. The direction must lead to him.

There are many prospective paths we might tread in life, and the road’s curves often conceal even intended destinations. If Jesus is ‘the way’ to God, how can we be sure that we are on that correct path?

Allow me to suggest that the little disciplines we have taken on in Lent serve to camber our tread on the road of life. A short review of unexpected challenges indicates that we cannot foresee every curve life takes. But we can pitch our tyres to tread the path that is given to us; we ready ourselves to walk true and keep our footing when we encounter bends in the road.

The paschal path that Christ forges for us – the Holy Week march from Palm Sunday to Easter – is not predictable either. It began with Jesus’s earthly success and acclaim. Recall the Mass for Palm Sunday, which begins by celebrating his triumphant procession into Jerusalem: ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who

comes in the name of the Lord!' Before long, though, the joy yields to sad confusion as the psalmist cries, 'My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?' This emotional jump always catches me by surprise.

But that is often the way life works. Life is ticking along just fine, and then ... we learn of the drug overdose of an old friend. Or your spouse's doctor calls to talk to you both about the CAT scan. Your daughter informs you that she and her husband are going to separate for a while. Or you open your Twitter feed before bed to find that Notre Dame Cathedral is on fire, and you are surprised by a new flavour of grief.

As Jesus moves into Jerusalem, the gospel message – the good news – is frustrated. He has a dinner with friends that is tinged with the sadness of betrayal. Even his most devoted companions sense trouble ahead, and several abandon him. He is openly mocked, rejected, beaten and spit upon. He undergoes physical and mental anguish, and lays down his life. All seemed a loss.

On the journey of life, we too lose loved ones to death in grand, visible-to-the-world ways – funerals of grandparents, parents, siblings and friends. But we also carry unseen losses that ring in the corners of our hearts everyday: the death of relationships, jobs or hopes, of youthful optimism or trust... But there is good news to be had, even here. Easter reminds us that God does not send us down dead ends. Jesus has trodden this paschal path for us. He is the first fruits (1 Cor 15:20), a forerunner (Heb 6:20). The one who runs ahead does not, cannot, run the race of life for us, but does point out the way. In the farewell discourse (John 14:1-4), Jesus reminds us, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled; have faith in God and faith in me. I will go forth to prepare a place for you; and I will come back to take you with me, that where I am, you may also be. Where I am going, you know the way.'

To follow the way means we are not afraid to walk the full course of our own life. What is the joy that comes from Easter? It is this: because Jesus has undergone death and risen to new life, now all of life is infused with new purpose. For us Christians, every turn that life takes can have meaning, cambered not by our own toil, but by the grace of God. To proclaim 'We are an Easter people!' does not mean that life is all sweets and sunshine. It means that no matter where we are in life, we are always somewhere on the Easter path.

When you and I do an examination prayer over the stuff of our lives, it does not take long to see whereabouts we are on that path with Christ.

Consider, if you will...

**Are you in a productive and successful part of life? Do you enjoy success, good health and friendships?** If so you are in solidarity with Jesus's active, successful earthly ministry. Jesus brought real healing and life to people; he had friends, drank wine at weddings and enjoyed the company of all manner of people. You enjoy the energy and satisfaction that comes from success and camaraderie. But perhaps you are not at this place on the path.

**Do you instead feel judged, anxious or isolated these days?** Perhaps there has been broken trust in a relationship, or someone has wronged you. Perhaps you are suffering the consequences of decisions you, or others, have made. Maybe you are dreading the uncertainties of what is to come. You are in solidarity with Christ at his Last Supper, and in the Garden of Gethsemane, and in his trial before Pilate.

**Are you feeling burdened and alone? Have you lost a loved one recently? Does your physical suffering seem to be pointless? Are you experiencing anxiety or anguish?** You walk with the Christ who mourns the death of his friend Lazarus, and who is himself facing the way to the cross.

**Maybe you are going through a period of sickness, addiction or diminishment yourself?** This is solidarity with Christ as he suffers quietly on the cross, with all manner of people watching, without understanding.

**Perhaps you are on the far side of some painful event, but you are waiting for the spark of life to return again. Maybe you are in the grips of depression, or settling into life after a divorce or death.** This is what the great preacher Casey Beaumier SJ calls a period of 'tomb-like waiting'. You are in solidarity with Jesus in the tomb on Holy Saturday, as he waits to come alive again.

**Or maybe, by the grace of God, you have the gift of hindsight. You are looking back at something that was very painful – but now the sting of death has gone.** You have suffered through some awful

period, and now you feel alive again, with fresh eyes, a renewed spirit. You feel like your old self, but wiser: strong, comfortable in your own skin, and restored to life. You are experiencing the resurrection with Jesus – you are tasting the joy of Easter even now.

But wait, a little voice chirps from within, isn't this putting me at the centre of the story? On the contrary: each of us, Christian or otherwise, experiences suffering, grief and death – and often we do so in isolation. Our world tries to sell us on the lie that we can stay one step ahead of pain and loss. And yet when we spend our energies trying to avoid them, we end up further isolated and unhappy. But followers of Christ know where they are on the Easter path, because Jesus has charted the way, and each year the Church re-enacts this paschal path.

In that same Ash Wednesday homily, Pope Francis reminds us that we don't walk alone; there are fellow travellers along the way. The three disciplines of Lent – prayer, almsgiving, and fasting – keep us in touch with 'three realities that do not fade away':

Prayer reunites us to God; charity, to our neighbour; fasting, to ourselves. God, my neighbour, my life: these are the realities that do not fade away and in which we must invest.

These disciplines help us remember that everyone we meet is also somewhere on their own Easter path, whether they would recognise that or not. Each of the people you and I encounter is a child of God, and the Easter path changes how we see them. Think, if you will, of the people who irritate you. That insecure woman who will not stop talking at the bible study group? Maybe she's feeling isolated, with Jesus in Gethsemane, and starved for company. The old widower next door who is constantly asking for help? Maybe he's with Jesus on the cross, feeling left behind. The young hotshot in your department who

seems to be angling for your job? He's with Jesus in his successful public ministry, and may be trying to provide for his family – while you are facing your own diminishment. That grouchy new priest who seems cold and irritable? Maybe he is in tomb-like waiting, mourning the loss of relationships or youthful hopes, awaiting new life after the transfer from his old parish.

Through a little examination and displacement of myself as the centre of the story, I can see that we are all somewhere on this path. With Easter eyes, we can be a source of solidarity and encouragement for everyone we encounter on the journey of life.

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If Holy Week teaches us anything it is that pleasure is sweet, but joy has pain at its centre. This paschal season, perhaps we can take stock of where we are on the Easter path. We need not force a smile, or gorge ourselves on chocolate bunnies (let alone Sour Patch Kids). Perhaps there is grace, and joy, to be found in savouring the blessings we find, bittersweet though they may be. Knowing where we are on the path to Easter – and where those around us are – constitutes spiritual maturity and solidarity with those in greatest need.

The Lord is the goal of our journey in this world, Pope Francis reminded us. The direction must lead to him. As we tread the journey of life, let us trust that the Risen Lord will camber the path ahead, and walk with us each step of the way.

Happy Easter, one and all.

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