Lent books 2023: a round-up of devotional reading

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*Mark Oakley* considers publishers’ offerings for the penitential season

WHEN the Holocaust survivor and writer Elie Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, the Nobel Committee called him a “messenger to mankind”. His message of “peace, atonement, and human dignity” is, perhaps, best summed up in his wise and urgent advice: “Never allow anyone to be humiliated in your presence.”

Sadly, more than 30 years later, humiliation is, perhaps, the most toxic social dynamic of our age. Nations often humiliate one another, creating war and aggression along with a decreased self-awareness. Likewise, with similar results, humiliation is evident in school playgrounds, domestic relationships, workplaces and wages, late-night comedy, and social media, as well as in parliamentary and even synodical debates. We are living the consequences of unleashed and often unrecognised humiliation in our relating. We are badly in need of another messenger to wake us out of it.

Lent is such an annunciation, bearing the message that anyone who is intimate with God will be known by their humility, not for their humiliation. Lent encourages us to seek practical and prayerful ways to deepen this vital intimacy. Happily, Lent books this year, in their varying ways, hold a compass for us, as we explore the atlas of the heart with the desire to turn from something coldly acidic to a human and humane being, created with dignity and formed in the likeness of Christ.

I was particularly helped in this regard by Paul Dominiak’s *The Falling of Dusk*. His concern is to explore how religious conviction remains possible without certainty, and how faith and doubt necessarily co-exist, avoiding both religious dogmatism and doctrinaire atheism. He converses both with the great doubters of Christianity and with the meaning of Jesus’s final words on the cross, those messages of repair spoken as “darkness covered the earth.”

Dominiak is open, wise, and thoughtful. It is a book full of theological ideas, but the tone is that of a retreat address rather than a treatise. It is a book for those who have lost faith in faith, or those who feel that they haven’t properly integrated honesty of experience with theological truth. His creative curation of the Seven Last Words is rewarding and, though some may find it a tiny bit too heady at times, many more will be grateful for its heart, and for its grace and ability to help in translating belief into the habits of relating to God, others, and oneself. I am still gratefully reflecting on his insight that: “we can’t hate our way through hurt without becoming trapped by it.”

John O’Donoghue observed that “Life is growth in the art of loss.” This theme is pursued in Robert Inchausti’s *The Way of Thomas Merton: A prayer journey through Lent*. Nineteen short chapters, each followed by some questions for reflection, introduce us to Merton’s work, particularly his emphasis on being liberated from the “false self”. The author knows his subject, but presents Merton accessibly, without letting the material become trite or thin.

The question “Whose life am I actually living?” is resonant at a time when so many voices are shouting at us from the wings about what we should be doing on stage. Merton’s relentless commitment to seeing beyond what he is good at, to seeing where the mask has eaten into his face, and the destructive ways in which we are made to fit in with expectations, is an important provocation to us.

It is time for some of us to encounter Merton again. This compact little guide makes a good companion for Lent. Only too aware of that deadly humiliation, Merton instructs us that “A saint is not someone who has achieved a high degree of sanctity but rather someone who has the ability to perceive the sanctity in everybody else.”

ALAMY*Thomas Merton (1915-68), the American Trappist monk, mystic, author, and scholar of comparative religion*

Elaine Storkey’s *Meeting God in Matthew* is a very welcome addition to this Lent’s library. With a self-effacing scholarship that wants to share its discoveries to deepen faith rather than win admiration, Storkeyintroduces us to St Matthew and his Gospel in some fresh and insightful ways. With questions also set for discussion, this is a book to help the parish or chaplaincy congregation, or house group, to immerse themselves in a Gospel’s entirety, a Gospel that begins by telling us that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, and ends with his telling his disciples that he is with them always, to the very end of the age.

This presence of love, no matter what, is at the heart of Storkey’s reading of Matthew. It is a Gospel that reminds us that the early Christian community obviously had fiery issues and differences among themselves, and holding these two truths together, human difference and divine fidelity, we understand how vital it is to acquaint ourselves with Matthew’s faith in our own attempts as a Church to stay together and so to reflect the God who never walks away from us. Storkey resists shirking from textual conundrums, but neither does sheunweave the rainbow of the Gospel’s beauty.

[**OTHER STORIES**](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/1-february/books-arts/book-reviews/courses-and-daily-reflections-for-lent-2019)

[Courses and daily reflections for Lent 2019](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/1-february/books-arts/book-reviews/courses-and-daily-reflections-for-lent-2019)

[David Wilbourne reviews Henry Martin’s Eavesdropping and other Lent reflections](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/1-february/books-arts/book-reviews/courses-and-daily-reflections-for-lent-2019)

“Failosophy” is a name given to some recent interest in thinking failure through. This year, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Lent Book by Emma Ineson, *Failure: What Jesus said about sin, mistakes and messing stuff up*, contributes to the conversation by moving “towards an (imperfect) theology of failure”. Having written a book a few years ago on ambition, Ineson now, in post-Covid days, asks what failure is, as human beings and as a Church. She explores what Jesus said about failure, how he trained his disciples for it, how he spent time with failures, and how all this might translate into our own lives and communities today.

Her last chapter, “How to fail really well”, is a helpful and practical encouragement to accept that failure is natural, but fear of failure doesn’t have to be. Some may find reflections on failure all a bit middle-class. Failure is not so frightening when you have the mental, financial, or time resources to learn resilience and creativity from it. Without those resources, failure can be overbearing and paralysing, feeling utterly irredeemable. What faith communities offer people in this situation is a pretty pressing question.

Ineson’s gentle humour, honesty, and obvious faith help us to begin to work out why Donald Trump’s dividing of people into “winners” and “losers” is an evil humiliation and shaming of those who do not sit at influential tables or whose fragilities and fractures run deep. Ineson is, at the end of the day, a theologian of sensitive hope. The themes of her book are also explored in daily reflections from the Church of England, and she has co-written the daily-reflections booklet for adults (*see page 29*).

Stephen Cottrell’s *Godforsaken: The Cross — The greatest hope of all* also picks up the theme of failure in looking at Jesus’s cry from the cross that wants to know why God has forsaken him. His book is shaped by seven reflective chapters, with questions to stir our responses. It is classic Cottrell — words of a skilled preacher, anecdotal, world-engaging, intelligent but aimed at the heart, poetic, inspiriting. It is a book that reminds us that Christian faith is both a loving search, full of cries and glimpses, as well as a searching love, relentlessly trying to bring a little more kindness, truth and light into the world.

Like the poet R. S. Thomas, who scratched his soul on the glass that had been handed to him, Cottrell is able to hold together our chaotic worldly life and our more attuned selves that know what it is to be ambushed by epiphany and hope. Though often breathless as a speaker, his is a patient priesthood as he attends to where we are in our inner lives and where we might yet be with God. As Jesus hung on the cross, jeered at and, yes, humiliated, love was winning, as it always does, because it is the nature of the one who is our source.

I really hope that you enjoy these books this Lent and find yourself once again sailing on a better course towards the humble harbour of your soul.

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***The Falling of Dusk: The 2023 Lent Book*Paul Dominiak**Bloomsbury £12.99
(978-1-4729-9047-1)
Church Times Bookshop £10.99

***The Way of Thomas Merton: A prayer journey through Lent*Robert Inchausti**SPCK £9.99
(978-0-281-08582-8)
Church Times Bookshop £7.99

***Meeting God in Matthew*Elaine Storkey**SPCK £9.99
(978-0-281-08195-0)
Church Times Bookshop £7.99

***Failure: What Jesus said about sin, mistakes and messing stuff up (The Archbishop of Canterbury’s Lent Book 2023)*Emma Ineson**SPCK £10.99
(978-0-281-08784-6)
Church Times Bookshop £8.99

***Godforsaken: The Cross — the greatest hope of all*Stephen Cottrell**Hodder & Stoughton £14.99
(978-1-399-80524-7)
Church Times Bookshop £11.99