



Newsletter

February - March 2026

“The Spirit immediately drove him out into the desert.”
(Mark 1.12)

Not only Jesus, but we all, despite avoidance and aversions, are driven out into the desert. We may be surprised to hear that it is the Spirit who drives us! The Spirit is not just the “Comforter”, as the King James Bible translates the Greek *paraklētos*, but literally “the one called to our side”: by our side so as to reveal our calling more deeply. The Spirit is the One, after all, who calls us to holiness, and holiness means allowing God to be the centre of one’s life, not confined to a corner. Our lives are to become continuous prayer and worship to the God of our life. It means becoming attuned to God’s will. Jesus’ time in the desert affirms that the Father is at the centre of His being and makes Him at one with the Father’s mission. The season of Lent invites us into that same desert, that we may be re-centred in the Father and hear from the One who is alongside us: the Spirit, unfolding our calling in Christ ever more deeply, allowing God’s song to resound through us.

We follow Christ into the desert, not literally, but metaphorically. In this way, the grounds of a monastery are sometimes called a ‘desert’, so the St Benedict Centre could be described as being in the desert of St Mary’s Abbey. This is due to the fact that early monasticism began its life at the margins of

society, in the desert, when the so called ‘Desert Fathers (Abbas) and Mothers (Ammas)’ radically responded to Jesus’ command in the Gospels (see passages from Matthew: 19.21; 16.24; 10.39; 6.24), by withdrawing to the desert to follow the call to holiness. The desert is the place where there are no comforts, no distractions of society: exactly the place to throw oneself on God’s mercy, and for the battle for holiness to emerge through grace, to begin.

Abba Anthony said, “He who remains quietly in solitude is saved from three areas of conflict: hearing, speaking and seeing. He only has one remaining area of conflict, the battle of the heart.” The desert is the place that brings the inner ‘passions’ into stark relief, allowing a person in prayer to excavate, through grace, the roots of the emotions and disordered desires that threaten to overwhelm and disorientate us. The process of wrestling with our passions and our sins, becomes our teacher, in “...something given // And taken, in a lifetime's death in love, // Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender...” (T.S. Eliot, Dry Salvages V). Two sayings from Abba Antony make this clear: “Whoever has not experienced temptation cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Without temptations no-one can be saved,” and then, “This is the great work of man: always to take the blame for his own sins before God and to expect temptation to his last breath.”

“Ecce tempus idoneum”, the Gregorian Chant, that remains in some hymnals, is sometimes rendered, “Now is the healing time decreed.” The time in the desert is a healing time. Where would we be without it? Lent is this healing time.

In the “Life of St Antony”, there is a scene when Antony, having made the tombs of a cemetery his home, is assailed by demons. After Antony endures a really rough time, they depart, and he experiences consolation from God. He asks the Lord: “Where were you? Why did you not appear at the beginning to make my

pains to cease?” And a voice comes to him, “Antony, I was here, but I waited to see your fight; since you have endured, and did not surrender, I will always be a helper for you.”

Here, an experience of God’s absence masks His very real presence. Actually, as the Psalmist says, for those who endure and continue to wrestle: “By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.” (Ps. 42.8).

This Lent the St Benedict’s Centre is offering a series of Quiet Days on Christian Spirituality, every Tuesday, from 24th February to 24th March (10am -3pm), inviting participants to ‘enter into the desert’ and pray in the traditions of the Desert Fathers and Mothers; Celtic Christianity; St Benedict, and St Ignatius of Loyola. We go into Holy Week with a Quiet Day led by Bishop Simon Burton-Jones, asking us to own our weakness in a world that overlooks the weak and shuns humility. Come and join us from Lent through to Holy Week!

Fr Richard Fermer

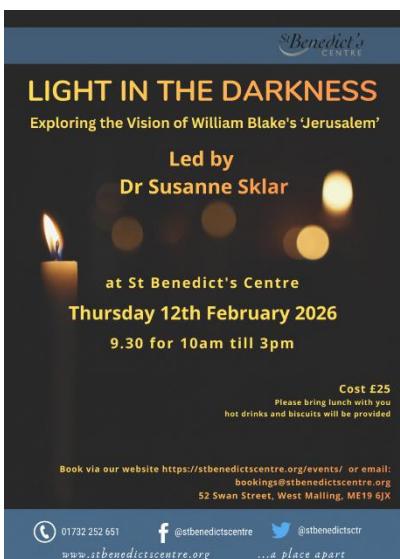
The Rev’d Dr. Richard Fermer
Director of St Benedict’s Centre



Events coming up in February and March

Light in the Darkness – Reflection Day

Thursday 12th February, 9.30 for 10am-3pm



It is easy to get demoralised about the state of the world, especially after a long winter. And yet Christians are called to hope.

On this reflective day, Susanne Sklar will explore the extraordinary vision of William Blake's classic 'Jerusalem'. She will propose Blake as a prophet of peace for the world, offering a Christian vision for times such as our own.

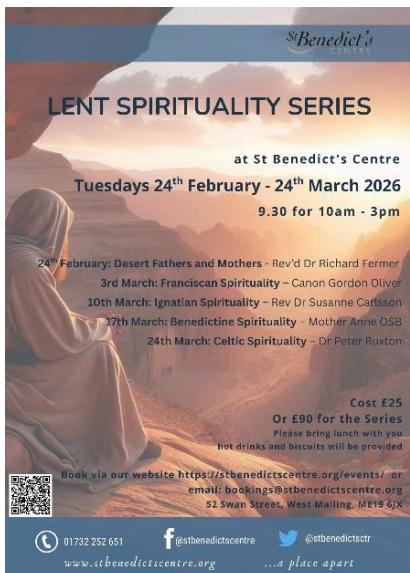
Rather than allow ourselves to become demoralised, we can find fresh hope with which to face the challenges of our own day.

Susanne Sklar is a retired academic who has led retreats and quiet days in different parts of the world for many years.

Cost: £25 including refreshments but please bring your own lunch.

Lent Spirituality Series – a series of reflection days

Tuesdays 24th February - 24th March, 9:30 for 10am-3pm



This Lent series will be a practical rather than scholarly exploration of some of the key influences within the history of Christian spirituality, with reflections from the leaders of each Quiet Day, along with opportunities for discussion, individual reflection and private prayer.

Cost: £25 per day, or £90 for the Lent series (I-IV), including refreshments. Please bring your own lunch.

I. The Desert Fathers and Mothers, led by Very Rev Richard Fermer – 24th February

The lives and sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers have played a formative role in shaping the development of subsequent Christian spirituality. On this day, we will be reflecting and praying around three themes of the Desert Fathers and Mothers: (i.) the journey towards the goal of stillness (hesychia); (ii.) repentance and the gift of tears (penthos); (iii.) compassion and mercy towards others.

Richard Fermer is the Director of the St Benedict's Centre, West Malling, and an experienced leader of retreats and pilgrimages. His priestly formation alongside the Community of the Resurrection gave him a devotion to monastic spirituality. He has a PhD in Systematic Theology from King's College London.

II. Franciscan Spirituality, led by Canon Gordon Oliver 3rd March, 9:30 for 10am-3pm

St Francis of Assisi is truly a saint for our times. Our day together will focus around the four reflection themes of Francis and his Worlds; Francis and the Cross of Christ; Francis and Clare of Assisi: Reconciliation, Renewal, Hope, and Franciscans Today. Each session will include input, opportunities for questions and discussion, silence, and prayer.

Gordon Oliver has served in parish and diocesan ministry and as a practical theology teacher. He now offers spiritual direction and Christian ministry support and supervision. He is a member of the Anglican Franciscan Third Order and is currently Area Formation Guardian of the West Kent Area.

III: Ignatian Spirituality, led by the Rev'd Dr Susanne Carlsson – 10th March, 9:30 for 10am-3pm

Who was Ignatius of Loyola? How did the spirituality associated with him develop and what is distinctive about Ignatian Spirituality? How is this spirituality lived today and what makes Ignatius of Loyola so popular? The day is geared towards those who are interested in learning more about Ignatian spirituality, and during it, there will be time to experience a taste of Ignatian spirituality.

Susanne Carlsson is the Spiritual Adviser for Rochester Diocese, and a teacher, spiritual director, and retreat guide in the UK and Scandinavia, specialising in Ignatian spirituality.

IV: Benedictine Spirituality, led by Mother Anne OSB
17th March, 9:30 for 10am-3pm

The Rule of Saint Benedict lays out a pattern of life that integrates mind, body and spirit so that we may engage our whole being to ‘pray without ceasing’. It continues to inspire people today and provides much wisdom to guide us as we seek to live God-centred lives in our distracted and media-soaked society. Mother Anne has a PhD in computer science from Cambridge University, UK, and worked for 25 years in the hi-tech world of ‘Silicon Fen’ (as the area around Cambridge has come to be known). She was involved in early experiments with social media but became disillusioned with the idea that more technology was always a good thing. This led to training in massage therapy and exploration of the relationship between body and prayer. Eventually she followed God’s call to live a life of prayer, entering the Benedictine monastic community of Malling Abbey in the UK in 2009.

V. “Celtic Spirituality” led by Dr Peter Ruxton
24th March, 9:30 for 10am-3pm

Influenced by the tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and early monasticism, the day will consider why Celtic Spirituality is important, reflecting particularly on ‘the Presence of God and the Sacramental Universe’ and ‘Peregrinatio and the Inner Journey.’ Peter Ruxton completed a dissertation on Celtic Spirituality as part of a Sarum College (Salisbury) MA in 2023. He has continued to research the Celtic genre, publishing in December 2024 and running retreats on the subject. Peter is also a trained Spiritual Director and a Trustee of the School of Contemplative Life.

Cost: £25 per day, or £90 for the Lent Spirituality series, including refreshments.

God's Slow Horses – Reflection Day

31st March, 9:30 for 10am-3pm



Bishop Simon Burton-Jones will lead this day, looking at how we can own our weakness in a world that overlooks the weak. It will be centred on reflections on the letters to the Corinthians in Holy Week: “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.” (1 Cor.1. 27).

Cost: £25 including refreshments.

Enquiries and bookings via our website:

<https://stbenedictscentre.org/> where you can also check all event information and updates. Alternatively contact us via email: bookings@stbenedictscentre.org

Need to cancel your booking?

When you book a place at one of our events, we ask for payment in advance. If you need to cancel, your payment will be refunded in full if cancellation is seven days or more before the event; if cancellation is within the seven-day period you will instead receive a voucher to be used for another one of our events.

Event cancellations

While we are always reluctant to cancel an event at short notice, we may have to do so in case of illness, bad weather conditions or low take-up. You will be contacted as soon as circumstances require us to cancel an event.