

First Sunday of Lent 2021

Almighty God, whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness, and was tempted as we are, yet without sin: give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit; and, as you know our weakness, so may we know your power to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Heavenly Father, your Son battled with the powers of darkness, and grew closer to you in the desert: help us to use these days to grow in wisdom and prayer that we may witness to your saving love in Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Genesis 9.8–17: Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹‘As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’ ¹²God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’ ¹⁷God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’

1 Peter 3.18–end: For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. ²¹And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Gospel: Mark 1.9–15: In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ ¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. ¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

Reflection:

Throughout Lent we are encouraged and invited to grow more fully in our understanding and recognition of who Jesus was and how we can more fully shape our lives around his way.

We find Jesus' ministry beginning in the desert or wilderness, a seemingly harsh physical environment of dryness and of openness to the elements, extreme heat, dazzling sunshine by day, extreme cold by night.

Perhaps there were also some places of much needed shade, certainly some places of wild beauty and the opportunity to sit beneath a clear bright star lit night sky. In his spending 40 days here, we can try to think of this as an environment that Jesus might grow into, noticing the particularities of the landscape even that which is parched and dry. A growing sense of the good earth in all its fullness, amidst the rocks, boulders and stones.

Growing closer to this environment, we will find Jesus understanding more about himself and growing closer to God. So, we might ask, "How did he spend his time?". What were his many and varied thoughts? What did he notice, did he reflect on particular memories, and what might all this have led him to think more about? In Matthew and Luke's gospels we find Jesus presented with 3 challenges and that he came to reject all 3 of the attitudes and actions that these opened out to him.

They went something like this; "Wouldn't it be so nice and really lovely if everything was just how I would want it to be, rather than being like these hard seemingly useless lumps of rock in front of me, even though each does have its own uniqueness and untold story; and wouldn't it be good if everyone was just like I would want them to be and not have their own stories and understandings and experiences of life meaning that they say and do things differently to my way of thinking?"

In the Musical Wicked, one character has a song with the line that happiness is found when all your hopes and dreams come true, but she later recognises that selfishly pursuing only her own personal agenda has come at quite a cost for everyone else.

So, the first challenge Jesus faces is to turn away from forcing people to conform to one tidy self-reference point. We will find instead throughout his ministry that he will show a whole variety of ways of responding to the many different people, in many different situations who were facing many difficult challenges. We think of when the Canaanite woman challenged Jesus about his lack of compassion for her daughter's illness and his words about being sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. "Even the dogs eat the scraps under the table" she says, and Jesus changes his initial negative response and instead praises the woman for her faith.

In our communities we must now think and plan for how we will be in the coming months and further ahead. The start of Lent gives us a bigger canvas to work from. A desert landscape that was a harsh physical environment in which we consider the human and emotional landscape of people's lives, hopes and disappointments, order and disorder, calmness and turmoil, healing and disease. And we do this recalling that those who Jesus sought out and those who came to him, were often very much aware of their physical or emotional suffering and pain.

In a recent survey, people in the UK were asked if times of suffering led them to be more open to God: most said not. In India, the response to the question was completely different: suffering there recognised as leading to greater faith and greater dependence on God's love and goodness.

So to the second challenge faced by Jesus. If he had taken that route put to him of having things sorted out just as he might like them to be, he is now encouraged to think about how much he might then enjoy this next phase of things. Occupying a place of invincibility towards anything that does not conform to how things and people really are where all vulnerability is shut off. We might remember Job early on accepting his ever growing and more dreadful suffering with a grim sense of inevitability accepting it all as being God's will and how powerless he is to change anything.

All this unlike later on when Job comes to a different understanding of God and considers God suffering alongside him and with him; and of God being with all people in their suffering and place of need. Being always stoic and invincible and lacking emotional connection is not how Jesus will relate to others. We will find him weeping when he comes to the grave of his friend Lazarus.

And then the final challenge that is put to Jesus, which was for him to consider a controlling person who becomes invincible and closed down to others, probably also with a fundamentalist view of faith and belief. Being so sure, so clear of moral superiority, so protected from emotional fall out and surrounded largely by people fearful of asking questions or able to safely articulate their own perceptions of how things are and how things might be. This is very different to Jesus.

Under the clear night skies of the desert, he came to a very real sense that, just as vast and numerous as are the stars of the sky, so are all people, sons and daughters of Abraham. The community of those who he will lead will be one that is open to all and deeply caring of all. Being with people in their troubles, particularly those most battered and broken by life and helping them to face the hardest of times of suffering and its consequences.

In heading out into the wilderness, Jesus starts his ministry with an open look at himself, a consideration of what might be ahead and of how he can equip himself to honestly face this. Not by trying to seek popularity by saying what people want to hear and seeking to make an impact, not by doing spectacular things and not by demonstrating leadership by creating a wall or cloak of separation and then hiding behind this.

Instead, we find Jesus in the wilderness remaining rooted in his sense of God's unconditional love; rooted in the vulnerability of God's compassion and forgiveness; which he will then show in his words and actions throughout his life. And we find that he will give others their wings to fly, to rise above the spiral of despair and cynicism that only sees the worst in others and expects the worse to happen with little prospect of anything ever changing.

So, during Lent we are encouraged to make a stand together with Jesus and with his way of living. Lent giving us a time to be more honest about ourselves and to allow God's landscape, in its fullest and most varied sense, and the landscape of other people's lives and experiences, to continue God's transforming work in each of us.