

Parish of Central Exeter

1st Sunday of Lent

21st February 2021

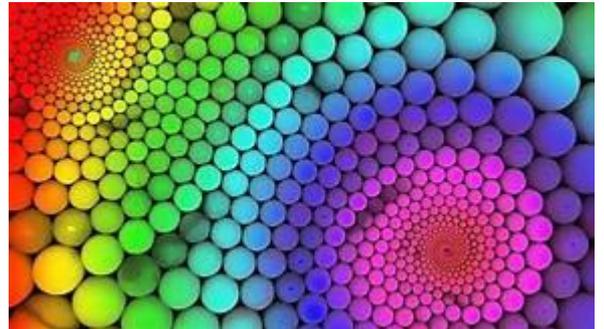
Lenten Journeys

Welcome everyone.

Our reflections this morning are by Charles and this evening by Richard. Many thanks to you both.

Welcome to the penitential purple of Lent.

We tend to think of Lent as the time when Jesus was in the wilderness being tempted by the Devil. Yet today's readings, which start with Noah and the covenant of the Rainbow then move into Mark's quickfire account of Jesus's baptism and temptation, don't really conjure up a wilderness experience. So our worship this morning will not be desert focused. That will change this evening at Night Prayer.



Call to Worship

God of storms and rainbows,
God of rain and sunshine,
God of all creation we worship and adore you.

We gaze in wonder at the beauty of your creation
and marvel at stormy skies transformed with the vibrant colours of a rainbow.
Like Noah and his family,
we praise you for this everlasting sign of your love and care
for the whole creation in your desire to preserve and not destroy life.

And at Jesus' baptism,
the sky again revealed your love
when you identified him as your beloved Son,
strengthening him with the same Spirit
who empowers and strengthens each of us.

For all these assurances of your love for us and for the whole creation,
we praise and worship you, O God,
in the power of the Holy Spirit
and in the name of Jesus Christ,
our Saviour and Lord. **Amen.**

(written by Moira Laidlaw, and posted on Liturgies Online)

Gathering Hymn

'Eternal Ruler of the ceaseless round.'

No Video, but the words are on the screen. Verse 2 is omitted in the singing. Sung by St Bartholomew's Schola, members of an Anglican church community based in Seattle, USA.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ka8baGQh-24&t=57s>

Confession

Lord, at times I find it hard
to hold on to my hopes for myself,
for members of my family,
or for the world
where bad things can and do happen.

Help me when I feel depressed and hopeless
to see the rainbow as your sign of hope.
Raise my spirits within me,
help me to do my part,
and when I have done it
leave the future with you.

I do not expect a trouble-free life
but in my heart of hearts
I know you are faithful
and will never abandon me,
those I love,
or the world around and beyond me.



Collect for the first Sunday in Lent

Heavenly Father,
your Son confronted the powers of darkness
that obscure your compassion and love for all of creation:
help us to use these days to grow in wisdom and prayer,
so that we may witness to that saving love
proclaimed in Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

Readings

Genesis 9: 8-17. The Covenant of the Rainbow

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ⁹"I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you ¹⁰and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all

life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

¹² And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: ¹³ I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. ¹⁶ Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.”

¹⁷ So God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.”

REFLECTIONS on the First Reading Genesis 9.8-17

The ancient Israelites borrowed their Noah stories of the great flood from the myths of today’s Iraqi ancestors - their Mesopotamian captors and then neighbours mainly during their Exile of the sixth century BCE. There is some archaeological evidence of human civilisation there before and after a great deluge in the Tigris and Euphrates valleys, as well as in the Black Sea, whose level used to be much lower. Speculation includes the results of global warming connected to the end of the last ice age with its colossal glacial melt.

The Israelites viewed their purloined flood myths as historical, as the inevitable result of human disobedience and failure to live as Yahweh their creator intended, and also as God’s loving intention to start all over again with a covenant for the whole earth. Never another flood for anybody! See the rainbow and trust God.

If you look as verse 3 of chapter 9, you’ll want to include all vegetation and all the conditions for life of any kind anywhere within the love of God and the orbit of human responsibility.

With today’s rising sea levels and life-threatening “natural” catastrophes, can we still look at the rainbow as symbol of security? Will the rainbow hold? It will when we learn to act more responsibly and cooperate with God.

Worship song

‘Lord for the years your love has kept and guided us.’ Sung here by the Choral Singers of St Martin’s in the Fields. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aluwWcq4I>

Gospel Reading Mark 1: 9-15

The Baptism and Testing of Jesus

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

¹² At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, ¹³ and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

Jesus Announces the Good News

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

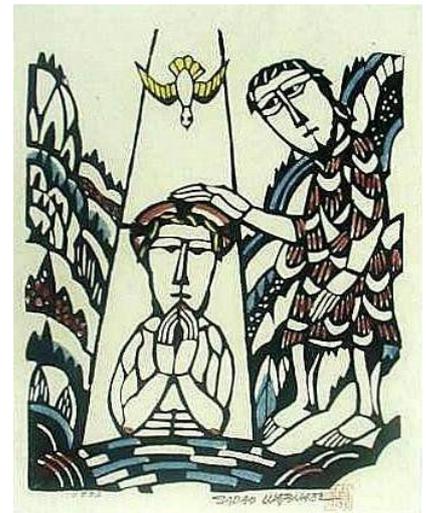
Reflection

In Mark's rapid-fire narrative of only seven verses here, Jesus leaves his home town of Nazareth, suddenly turns up near Jerusalem, where he gets baptised by John, hangs around somewhere until the Baptist is imprisoned, goes off to the modern Jordanian desert to spend a long time (the Jewish meaning of the exact number 40 – remember Noah's flood and Israel's exodus) and then hurries home again to begin his ministry.

Mark's baptism account is brief (as are Matthew's and Luke's) and especially so is his temptation story. It's not clear from any of the Gospels' baptism accounts if anyone else but Jesus and John see the dove-like descent of the Spirit or hear the Jesus-commending heavenly voice. So I think we must look for the evangelists' symbolic meanings – no less true for that – in their accounts.

The first symbolic truth is that Jesus is divinely driven by God. It's not a random happening, but a "plan". Jesus appears suddenly and quietly from the relative obscurity of the far north, and is recognised, approved and commissioned by the popular and authoritative John the Baptist and even by God's own very self.

Then immediately on John's imprisonment, Jesus withdraws to find solitude and some answers. In his ears the commending voice of heaven becomes the tempting voice from hell, but against all odds he refuses any compromise, and steels himself against an easy and conventional life with family, friends and colleagues in a nice neighbourhood and chooses to travel God's way of painful sacrifice.



*Baptism of Jesus
Sadao Watanabe*

Some have seen in Jesus' wilderness way a picture of the traditional Jewish scapegoat, starved, driven out into the desert, and laden with the people's sins, suffering for others that they might live. Like the scapegoat, he will be patient and passive. He will be on the receiving end of the actions of others, while paradoxically being entirely active in bringing about God's will of love, instigating singlehandedly a sea change in the course of human history.

So then, armed with God's resolve, he goes back home to some of the most unsympathetic audiences who knew him from before, to preach "news" that would be recognised as "good" by only a faithful few, of a kingdom that is already here and at the same time, not yet. Some with faith will be able to recognise and welcome it, while for many it will remain "hidden". This is what some have called Mark's Gospel's "messianic secret".

For most of Jesus' contemporaries, talk of a coming kingdom could only mean the restoration of their Jewish nation and its temporal power, but Jesus teaches a different model of monarchy. Through Mark's Gospel runs his sadness of even Jesus' disciples' misunderstanding and outright rejection of his kingdom model. Mark says to cling to most kinds of power is to renounce Jesus' reign.

To finish, from Word of Truth: "When God engages with humanity, there is struggle and hardship involved. The Son of God is called and commissioned by the Father to do the Father's will; only in the doing of it will he know himself to be the Son. It is the same for us who, this and every Lent, follow in his steps."

Prayer

Gracious God,
your amazing love extends through all time and space,
to all parts of your creation,
which you created and called good.

You made a covenant with Noah and his family,
putting a rainbow in the sky
to symbolize your promise of love and blessing
to every living creature,
and to all successive generations.

You made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah,
blessing them and their descendants
throughout the generations.

You made a covenant with Moses and the Israelite people
to all generations,
giving them the ten commandments
and challenging them to choose life.

In Jesus,
you invite us to enter into a new covenant,
in communion with all who seek to be faithful to you.

As people of faith,
we are called into covenant.
Your covenant of faithfulness and love
extends to the whole creation.

We pray for the healing of the earth,
that present and future generations
may enjoy the fruits of creation,
and continue to glorify and praise you. Amen.

(from the Web of Creation website. <http://www.webofcreation.org/>)

Affirmation of Faith

I believe in an innovative God,
who does not wait for us to find ourselves
but comes seeking the lost and calling us into a new way.

I believe in Jesus of Nazareth as God's crucial initiative,
that when he calls us to follow, Christ also gives us the power
to become, both in creed and deed, the children of the living God.

I believe in the Spirit by whom Jesus still comes to us,
calling us to follow him into an obedience which is true liberty
and to a humble service which is the fruit of holy friendship.

I believe in the church as the fellowship of Christ's people,
called to respect and support one another through joys and tribulations
as we travel the road towards the "promised land" of God's future.

(Bruce Prewer)

Intercessions for a Lenten journey

We pray today for all who are walking a hard journey:

for those whose daily paths encounter barbed wire and guns;

for those who did not want to leave home but were forced to;

for those who set out today in search of food and water;

for those whose journey is shattered by economic hardship;

for those whose journey is marred by pain or despair,
and for those who faithfully journey alongside them;
for those who are making a move and beginning again;
for those who are clinging on to something that has ended;
for those who are being bullied, and for those who are bullying;
for those who have just taken their first breath, and
for those who today will take their last.

May this Lenten journey, with its stories
about the hard places of Jesus' experience,
give strength and courage to all
whose journey is far from easy.
And may it inspire us to risk Christ's Way of love
as we share the journey with other travellers.
We make this prayer in his name. Amen.

(written by Ann Siddall and posted on the Stillpoint Spirituality Centre website.)

The Peace

If alone, smile and hug yourself (God does). If otherwise, share the Peace as appropriate.

A short Spiritual Communion

The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that if we offer ourselves in penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified, we may truly 'eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ', even when we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves.

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

O God,
help me to trust you,
help me to know that you are with me,
help me to believe that nothing
can separate me from your love
revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



An offertory prayer

We may not be in church, but we can still offer ourselves and our talents to God.

Blessed are you, God and creator of the universe,
as we offer you our activities, thanksgivings and our life.
We present ourselves, and our world, as we are and as you can make us,
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours,
and of your own do we give you. Blessed be God for ever.

As we prepare for communion you might like to listen to The Taizé chant 'Bless the Lord my soul'.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3IC2XWBxkkt&list=PLLYXW8JdtsuifD8Dlv78_nfKCBjhTZD5



Because there is no Breaking and Sharing we can have only Spiritual Communion with Christ. I'm sure you can find a way to use a few minutes of silence or conversation to enjoy this, and make it a sacramental moment.

Giving thanks for Christ's death and resurrection you may wish to say

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Post Communion Collect

God of the wilderness,
your Spirit leads us to face the truth,
unprotected and exposed:
in our times of trial
help us to resist the worship of empty power,
so that we may find our true food
in Jesus Christ, the broken bread. Amen.
(Anglican Church of Canada)

Commission & Benediction

Go, as beloved children of God,
to find your wilderness place
amidst the chaos of life.

Find God present there
revealing the purpose of your life
and, in loving service,
know the blessing of God
today and always.
(Church of Scotland)

Closing Music

'O love, how deep, how broad, how high'. The words are ascribed to Thomas à Kempis in the fifteenth century. Sung here by the choir of Sheffield Cathedral. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ro78Htb7UM0>



The Baptism of Christ. Orthodox Baptistry dome, Ravenna. Late 5th Century. The figure holding a green robe is the personification of the river Jordan. Although of pagan origin, such personifications were adopted by Christian artists.

Coffee Break

Viv says: Let's hear it for the Book of Numbers!

The Book of Numbers is one which may not be recommended as a good read and indeed which has often been associated with words such as 'monotonous' and 'boring'. It is after all mostly about, well yes, numbers. And lists. And the Israelites wandering around complaining about their lot, which some may say is quite like humankind today.



Apart from that though, this book challenges minds in many ways. The violence, destruction and genocide for a start, seemingly commissioned by God; what's that all about? Belief and unbelief, faithfulness and unfaithfulness, dependence on God and dependence on self are recurring themes.

As with the Old Testament in general, there are plenty of pointers towards Christ. There are stories within the story too. The setting up of what became known as the Sanhedrin, a spying mission, a brass serpent on a pole, a talking donkey. And a sisterhood: five sisters who took their grievance to the top men and got a change in the property laws. Let's hear it for Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tizrah!

(You can read all about them in Numbers 27: 1-11)

So Numbers. Not a bundle of fun, but like so much of the O.T., put on a hard hat and go mining; there are nuggets to be found!

For those who you who are active poets or strive to be active as poets, here some numbers to mull over.

Numbers Game

In nineteen fifteen
when Frost first wrote
there lived on earth
two billion souls;
now there are seven
(point three)
which makes me believe
I am four times the poet
I would have been then—
give or take a
half a billion men.

Seamus O' Brian

Scroll down for Night Prayer

Night Prayer

1st Sunday of Lent
21st February 2021

In the Wilderness

Preparation

i just realized
that in my imagination
the wilderness is always somewhere else;
a foreign landscape i actively have to enter
in the act of being faithful.

truthfully,
the wilderness is always where i am
right now
and faith is the courage to stay with it
when i'd rather pretend i am
anywhere else.

(written by Cheryl Lawrie and posted on hold this space.)

Hymn

'Kyrie Eleison.' A Russian version, of the well-known penitential words.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKnR9LqvYqk>

Prayer for Lent: Letting Go

O God, help us to use this season of Lent
to examine our attachments,
and to sense where You invite us
to live more simply and deeply.

Shine the light of Your love
into the private corners of our lives
where we have acquired so much clutter
that it has begun to restrict our freedom.



Teach us that in letting go
we become free, rather than deprived,
generous rather than covetous,
and spacious rather than restricted.
Amen.

(Ann Siddall and posted on the Stillpoint Spirituality Centre website.)

Reading Luke 4:1–13 (New Revised Standard Version)

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

General introduction

The account of Jesus in the wilderness appears in the three synoptic gospels of Matthew Mark and Luke. Mark, the earliest, has a very cursory comment two verses long, merely informing us that Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days where he was tempted by Satan, and was with the wild beasts. Matthew and Luke elaborate this by describing three specific temptations as in the above reading from Luke (Matthew's gospel puts the temptations in a different order).

Over the next three weeks, I will offer reflections on this episode by drawing upon Dennis Potter's television play *Son of Man*, priest Harry Williams' sermon *True Wilderness*, and my own *The Temptation Sonnets*.

Dennis Potter's *The Son of Man*

Broadcast in 1969, Potter's play was, for its time, controversial, depicting as it did a Jesus (played by Frank Finlay) who is often irascible and not very meek and mild or "Loving God"-like.

As an 18-year old from a conventionally ardent Baptist background, I watched in amazement and relief. In the main wilderness scene here was no Jesus dismissing the temptations of Satan with confident ripostes from the Hebrew scriptures (aka the Old Testament) as though he were a precursor of Oscar Wilde coining memorable quips, but a man in crisis about what the future held for him and what he should do.

As he wrestled with himself on the ground among the (low-cost, wobbly, papier-mâché) rocks, conviction of the rightness of his calling alternated with terror, with seemingly a touch of madness in his eyes. Here's most of that scene:



The wilderness.

Jesus stirs, trying to get on to his knees.

Jesus Is it — TIME! Is it — me? Me? (*He half pulls himself up. He begins to babble, almost demented by hunger, thirst and his sense of divinity*) Me? Me? Time has come. Me? It is — It is me, it is me, it is me, it is me... (*He stops. He stands, swaying. Silence. Then he speaks, more slowly and clearly*) He went up into the wilderness. He went up — I went up and spoke to... Make straight the way. Clear a path. The Kingdom of Heaven is upon — ME? (*Pause. Then he screams with the agony of the thought*) ME!?! It — is — m—e—e!

Silence. He looks about him, as though for the first time

Bread — oh, bread — br... (*He stops, pierced by a thought — the first challenge*) If it is me... (*He picks up a stone, almost falling as he does so, being so weak*) Bread — oh to eat some bread... (*He caresses the stone. He puts it up to his cheek*) He who is to come and fulfil the prophecies can surely turn stone into — into... (*He bites on the stone. But, evading the challenge, he hurls it away in almost the same gesture*) Ach! The Devil speaks! *I shall not listen!*

Potter's depiction of this episode is important, I suggest, not because it can be taken as an accurate portrayal of Jesus in the wilderness (an impossible task in any case, given that no-one else was there to take notes or record a video), but because of his sharp focus on crucial aspects of human life: the interplay of certainty and doubt; the impossibility of knowing what the long-term consequences will be of decisions which we have to make one way or the other; the risks of failure and the lure of accomplishment; our contribution to events

and our vulnerability to events beyond our control — yet he and we cannot escape either those events or the necessity of making decisions.

This emphasis on his human nature, shared (obviously) with all of us, means that whatever other titles have been attributed and bestowed on Jesus both biblically and traditionally over the centuries, that of ‘brother’ is both valid and reassuring. Brother Jesus, in his struggles in the wilderness, has begun his calling to transform human experience.

The recognition of Jesus as a *brother* is well expressed in a number of modern affirmations of faith, as in the one by Pastor Andreas Wagner (on Modernliturgist.org) which asserts:

“.....We believe in Jesus Christ, our holy brother,
Who stands by our side when light turns into darkness,
Who suffers our pain and turns it into a blessing.
For the presence of Christ in our lives,
We praise God the provider...”

Richard Skinner

We Pray

We will wait for you, O God.
Your Spirit compels us
to go into the wilderness,
and we ask for the courage to examine
the desert places in our hearts,
and to be willing to
face the adversaries in our lives—
that which lures us away
from being who you have created us to be.

We pray for the courage to face our wild beasts and fears.
Relieve the troubles of our hearts,
and the devastation of our distress.
Turn your love towards us
that we may we know your grace in our loneliness and afflictions.

We pray this prayer,
knowing that you watch over us, and deliver us.
We wait for you, O God.
In the name of our brother Jesus we pray,
Amen.

(excerpted from a longer prayer by Rev Karla. Posted on RevGalBlogPals)



The First Temptation of Christ by Peter Paul Rubens 1620 Cortauld Gallery, London.

In this painting the devil is depicted more as human rather than a grotesque caricature. Jesus too is not over idealised, without a halo or calm rebuttal of the temptation. There seems to be more of a struggle involved.

Closing Prayer

Go now. Listen for the voice of the Lord
and follow wherever it leads.
Do not be dominated by anything.
Allow no room within yourselves for deceit,
but offer yourselves as a temple for the Holy Spirit.

And may God be with you and speak through you;
May Christ Jesus be one with you and raise you to life;
And may the Holy Spirit dwell within you and make you holy.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,
In the name of Christ. Amen.

(Nathan Nettleton <http://www.laughingbird.net/>)

Blessing

The love of the faithful Creator
The peace of the wounded Healer
The joy of the challenging Spirit
The hope of the three in One
Surround and encourage you
Today, tonight and for ever.

(Kathy Galloway)

Closing music

James Wells, Moderator of the United Free Church of Scotland, tells the story of a little girl carrying a big baby boy in his 1884 book *The Parables of Jesus*. Seeing her struggling, someone asked if she wasn't tired. With surprise she replied: "No, he's not heavy; he's my brother."

This song became a big hit for the Hollies back in 1969 sung by Allan Clarke with Elton John on the Piano. This is their version with the words on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBI9i3HIFVE>

Thanks

Thanks to everyone who has participated, especially to Charles and Richard for their reflections, and Viv for Coffee Break on Numbers. Material taken or adapted from other websites has an attribution made where possible.

