

Parish of Central Exeter

3rd Sunday of Lent

7th March 2021

Lenten Journeys: Building on Strong Foundations

Welcome everyone.

Our reflections this morning are by Sheila and this evening by Richard. Intercessions are from the World Day of Prayer service. Many thanks.

Welcome to the penitential purple of Lent.

Today is the World Day of Prayer. The theme for the 2021 activities comes from the women of the Pacific islands of Vanuatu: Building on a strong foundation, which reflects today's Gospel reading. This evening Richard will take us to a totally different landscape but the questions about what we are trusting remain equally valid.

Call to Worship

O God, you are the gathering one
who calls us into community
with each other
to love and work,
to support and heal.

You are the gathering one
who calls us into community
with all people;
to bring justice and hope,
freedom and truth.

You are the gathering one
who calls us into community
with the whole creation;
to live in harmony,
to cherish and renew.

Let us worship the God
who makes us one.

(From the Christian Aid website)



Gathering Hymn

'Jesus shall reign where'er the sun', sung here by the St Michael's Singers. Words on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcHXOnKZ3ME>

Confession

The Old Testament reading for today is Exodus 20, better known as the Ten Commandments. We are using these as written in Common Worship© for our time of confession.

Hear these commandments which God has given to his people, and examine your hearts.

I am the Lord your God: you shall have no other gods but me.
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.

Amen. Lord, have mercy.

You shall not make for yourself any idol.
God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.

Amen. Lord, have mercy.

You shall not dishonour the name of the Lord your God.
You shall worship him with awe and reverence.

Amen. Lord, have mercy.

Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.
Christ is risen from the dead: set your minds on things that are
above, not on things that are on the earth.

Amen. Lord, have mercy.

Honour your father and mother.
Live as servants of God; let us work for the good of all,
especially members of the household of faith.

Amen. Lord, have mercy.

You shall not commit murder.
Live peaceably with all; overcome evil with good.

Amen. Lord, have mercy.

You shall not commit adultery.
Know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Amen. Lord, have mercy.



You shall not steal.
Be honest in all that you do, and care for those in need.
Amen. Lord, have mercy.

You shall not be a false witness.
Let everyone speak the truth.
Amen. Lord, have mercy.

You shall not covet anything which belongs to your neighbour.
Remember the words of the Lord Jesus:
'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'
Love your neighbour as yourself, for love is the fulfilling of the law.
Amen. Lord, have mercy.

Collect for the third Sunday in Lent

Eternal God,
give us insight
to discern your will for us,
to give up what harms us,
and to seek the perfection we are promised
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Readings

New Testament Reading John 2: 13-22 Jesus Clears the Temple Courts

¹³ When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

¹⁸ The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." ²⁰ They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.



Jesus overturns the
tables of the
moneychangers.

Fresco in the Scrovegni
Chapel, Padua, by Giotto
1301

Prayer

Truth be told, Jesus,
There are lots of tables that need overturning
in our lives;

Beneath the veneer of respectability
the tidy rows and neat regulations
hide dark addictions and angry judgements
hungry greed and heartless rejections.

We know the pain—and so do those around us—
of keeping up the facade;
What a relief it would be to have it all
upset, smashed, scattered, destroyed.

So, perhaps, Jesus, today you could pay us a visit
and help us to radically re-arrange
the furniture of our lives. Amen.

(written by John van de Laar, and posted on Sacredise.)

Gospel Reading Matthew 7 24-27 NIV

The Wise and Foolish Builders

²⁴ “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

Worship song

‘On Christ the solid Rock I stand’, sung here at the annual conference of the Evangelical Movement of Wales. Words are on the screen (and in English!)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4hPBDJg1I4>

Reflection

‘Build on a strong foundation’ was the theme chosen some years ago by the women of Vanuatu, a small group of islands 1,100 miles east of Australia in the southwestern Pacific Ocean, for the 2021 World Day of Prayer service. The islands lie in the tropical cyclone belt and they suffered from severe cyclones in 2015 and 2020 which caused much destruction. Foundations are important for buildings and for faith when storms hit. In Exeter, the discovery of the unexploded WW2 bomb reminded us of the devastation of war, the need for strong foundations and the shock from the unexpected event.

Before I quote the meditation prepared by the women of Vanuatu to reflect on the parable of the wise and foolish builders, I will turn to the gospel reading for the third Sunday of Lent.

John describes the cleansing of the temple by Jesus in detail at the beginning of his gospel. It is the first public event after the wedding at Cana, at which the ‘sign’ of ‘water into wine’ was intended for his disciples. Now Jesus with his disciples has gone to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. Here faithful Jews are gathering to offer animal or bird sacrifices as prescribed in their law. Jesus disrupts the commercial activity with dramatic actions and strong words. “Stop making my Father’s house a market-place” (v16c). The religious authorities want a sign to substantiate his claim ‘my Father’s house’ and to justify his actions. They want observable proof to show his authority. Jesus’ reply is like a riddle, “destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up” (v 19). This only makes sense to the disciples after the resurrection.

Jesus is challenging the foundations of the Jewish religion, the ritual of worship in the temple as the way to meet God, by foretelling the destruction of the temple both physically

and symbolically. Its replacement will be the 'temple' of his body, in his death, resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit in believers. The first readers of John's gospel understood this as they gathered in small groups to worship together in the name of Jesus and by the Holy Spirit. It took time for the early church to recognise that the defining signs of their Jewish faith – the temple, circumcision, sabbath rules – were no longer necessary as they followed Jesus. The Holy Spirit was guiding them into new understanding about Jesus and the way of life as believers. John records Jesus foretelling this as a role of the Holy Spirit to teach them in John 16:12ff. It is a constant challenge to the church as the gospel reaches out to different cultures and across time. What are the foundations of faith that do not change? What are the ideas, assumptions, ways of behaviour that need to be re-examined?

I close now with more questions from the meditation in the prepared service where we are encouraged to pause after each question and write our responses.

Meditation

This parable is a story of comparison and warning. Jesus offers us an example of how our choices can affect our lives.

Sometimes we are beaten by winds and storms in very corner of our lives. Due to our deep faith in Jesus, we find ourselves still standing.

What are the storms in your life today?

How is your faith providing a solid foundation for you?

Jesus says: 'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man'. We are very good at acting. But do we hear? Do we listen?

What practices in prayer help you hear and listen closely to the Word of God?

The parable presents us a choice: to be like a wise person or a foolish one. Do we listen to his words and act on them, or ignore them and let them wash over us? Our lives reflect the choices we make. Our legacy is the action we take.

How can we, through our choices and actions, live wisely?



Affirmation of Faith

Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, your mind and your soul.

We will love God with an intensity
such that no substitute will suffice,
the very mention of God's name will be precious
as we cleave to our time of communion with the sacred.

Love your neighbour as yourself.

We will respect the wisdom of our elders.
We will protect the lives and the reputations of those around us.
We will cherish the relationships entrusted to us.
We will not take what is not ours.
We will learn the value of enough.

Love the Lord your God.

(Katherine Hawker. Posted on her Liturgy Outside website)

Prayers with Vanuatu and the world

Let us be united in prayer with Vanuatu and the world.

Everlasting God, the God on whom Vanuatu stands, we ask you to help us stand for peace in our families and our nations. We commit the leaders and people of Vanuatu into your wise hands.

We want to stand against the forces of injustice present in our nations. Give us this authority over our islands and nations.

We pray that we can live in unity, love and peace in the context of ethnic and cultural diversity like Vanuatu and so many other places around the world.

Bind us together in love, peace and joy.

We pray for young women in Vanuatu who search for work and meaning, especially those who, hoping for a better life, move to the towns and cities, away from family and friends. May they develop the skills they need to find work, live wisely and fulfil their dreams.

We pray for the children of Vanuatu who do not have the opportunity to attend school, and for those on the streets who feel unloved and unwanted. May they find safe shelter and nourishment in their communities and in the embrace of God.

We pray too for the work of Kimbilio among street children in Lubumbashi.
May they learn of, and trust in, God's love, through the outreach of others.

We remember people living in places prone to natural disasters and the hazards of cyclones, hurricanes and volcanoes.

Almighty God protect communities from disasters and suffering. Heal the souls of the people and let them feel your love.

We pray for the Christian community in Vanuatu and for Christians here in Exeter, that they and we may extend God's justice and love to everyone.

May they and we be a living example of a community built on the strong foundation of Christ.

Finally we pray for anyone known to us who is in special need at this time.....

Merciful Father accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

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 Choir of the St David's Church sing verses from Psalm 119 in a setting by Nigel. This is an appropriate reflection on the Ten Commandments: 'My delight is in your statutes, O Lord, I will not forget your word.'

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MukD_lwpvm4&feature=youtu.be



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

Merciful Lord,
grant your people grace to withstand the temptations
of the world, the flesh and the devil,
and with pure hearts and minds to follow you, the only God;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Closing prayer

Holy God, in Jesus Christ you have built for us
an eternal house, a temple of righteousness,
a place of gracious plenty for the hungry
and abundant life for the poor in spirit.
Fill us with zeal for the body of Christ.
Overturn the tables of corruption and greed
and upset the imbalance of injustice,
so that we may worship you in spirit and truth;
through Jesus Christ, who is risen indeed. *(Presbyterian Church USA website.)*

Benediction

May the strength of God pilot us;
May the wisdom of God instruct us,
May the hand of God protect us,
May the word of God direct us.
Be always ours this day and for evermore.
(Attributed to St Patrick)

Closing Music

'Will your anchor hold in the storms of life?' We have changed the metaphor but the concept is the same! This was a hymn particularly associated with the Boys Brigade, but here we have it played by a Band from the Salvation Army which is just as appropriate, within a BBC Songs of Praise service from Leeds.

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



Scroll down for Coffee Break

Coffee Break

Building on unsure foundations?

Both Israel and Jordan have been diverting water from the River Jordan for irrigation purposes. As the Jordan flows into the Dead Sea, because the volume of water has diminished, the Dead Sea is shrinking - by more than one metre a year. As a result, hundreds of sinkholes are appearing – some the size of a basketball court and two storeys deep. Some of them join up with nearby holes to form giant ones. The craters pose a danger to tourists drawn to the world-famous mineral-laden waters. Tourist resorts have been closed, trees swallowed, caravans engulfed, roads buckled. This is happening because fresh groundwater is rising up and dissolving the salt to leave behind large cavities underground.

First observed in the 1970s, there are almost 4,000 sinkholes along the shores of the salty sea today. A couple of hundred new sinkholes are now appearing each year, and the rate is only expected to increase.

It is true that the Dead Sea has always been below sea level. Its highest ever level, it is thought, was during the last Glacial Maximum, some 20,000 years ago, but even then it was 170 metres below sea level compared to the 433 metres of today. But in 1896 British officials in a boat placed a marker at water level in the cliff. It is still there, but now 44 metres higher than the water surface.



Scroll down for Night Prayer

Night Prayer

3rd Sunday of Lent
7th March 2021

In the Wilderness



This is my third and final reflection on Jesus in the wilderness, the previous two weeks having drawn upon Dennis Potter's *Son of Man* and Harry Williams' *True Wilderness*. Today I make use of my own *Temptation Sonnets*, which offer an unusual point of view — or rather, three unusual points of view.

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.)

This Evening's Music

In keeping with Richard's approach of looking at the temptations in the wilderness from a different perspective, our music this evening also offers a different perspective from that which we are used to in a church service.

Song

This is 'Stand your Ground' by Within Temptation (an aptly named group perhaps?)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nmq1h5cQdk>

I can see when you stay low nothing happens.
Does it feel right?

Late at night things I thought I put behind me
haunt my mind.
I just know there's no escape now
once it sets its eyes on you.

But I won't run, have to stare it in the eye.
Stand my ground, I won't give in.
No more denying, I've got to face it.
Won't close my eyes and hide the truth inside.

If I don't make it, someone else will stand my ground.
It's all around, getting stronger, coming closer, into my world.
I can feel that it's time for me to face it, can I take it?
Though this might just be the ending of the life I held so dear.

But I won't run, there's no turning back from here.
All I know for sure is I'm trying.
I will always stand my ground.
Stand my ground, I won't give in.
I won't give up, no more denying.

I've got to face it. Won't close my eyes and hide the truth inside.
If I don't make it, someone else will stand my ground.
I won't give in, no more denying. I've got to face it.
Won't close my eyes and hide the truth inside.
If I don't make it, someone else will stand my ground.

Prayer for Lent:

Once we stood by the clear waters,
knowing who we were,
who the church was and where we were going....
...now we're in the desert....
...uncharted territory.
...severe and bleak.
...but full of possibilities.
...the rules are different.
The old ways don't work.
...it is a lonely place,
and dangerous.
There are snakes and scorpions.
Alien creatures.
We have been stripped of our illusions
of growth...
of plenty...
and we are in the desert.
waiting...
for God to speak.

Reading

Matthew 4: 1-11 (New International Version)

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

The Temptation Sonnets

One often effective approach in the writing of poetry is that of ventriloquism: giving voice to the otherwise voiceless. The poet Ursula Fanthorpe, for example, has written a trio of poems based on a painting of St George slaying the dragon in which she gives a voice to St George, to the dragon, and to the maiden being rescued. It's evocative and at times hilarious, especially when the maiden complains about being rescued by St George because she rather fancies the dragon. It's a technique which allows perspectives other than the obvious to be glimpsed, and makes us re-think our assumptions. Our own Keith sometimes adopts this approach in writing intercessions for morning services — at Christmas, we hear the thoughts of things present at the nativity such as the manger. The unexpected perspective holds our attention, deepens our prayer.

This is the approach I adopted in the three following sonnets. What, I wondered, did the stones make of the possibility that this starving man wandering around in their desert might turn them into bread? How would the pinnacle of the Temple (from where the High Priest signals the start of the day's services) respond to the incursion of the desert man? Would the high mountain welcome being considered an appropriate viewing point for world domination?

My conscious intention was to give voice to the voiceless, to broaden the context in which the temptations of Jesus are considered, to defamiliarize a familiar story so we can re-read it afresh. And, quite frankly, I did it because I enjoy mucking about with ideas like this. However, when I came to re-read the sonnets to use them here, a couple of years after I had written them, I realised that they can be seen in a different way. The responses of the stone, the pinnacle and the mountain can also be seen as epitomising different human responses: the intransigent who doesn't want to be changed; the fearful who evades the

challenge and responsibility of involvement; the apparently humble but secretly self-important who wants proper recognition.

There could well be other ways of reading them, for every poem is a collaboration between the poet, the reader, and the words on the page. You, the reader, are part of the creative act.

So see what you make of them and how, if at all, they contribute to your understanding of the account of Jesus in the wilderness... and perhaps consider which aspect of the whole temptation-in-the-wilderness event most resonates with you.

The Stone

I am the stone which, had he so chosen,
would, at his command, have changed into bread;
satisfied hunger, though far from ambrosian:
forty days banished of going unfed.
I know I was tempting, my colour, my shape,
lying nearby and so easy to grasp;
I swear that his mouth was just briefly agape
as he visualised eating me, his voice a harsh rasp.

It would have been weird to be what I'm not;
stone is my nature and stone I remain.
To change me to bread would have robbed me of what
is truly myself, my *self* would be slain.
He resisted; respected my right to be stone,
and that all I require is to be left alone.

The Pinnacle of the Temple

Why pick on me? My role has always been
to support the priest, quite literally, each day
as dawn approaches; from me he's clearly seen
to signal '*start the sacrifice!*'. You say
mine is a modest role? Perhaps, but where,
if not on me, would you suggest he stand?
The priest, I mean. The sacrifice, the prayer,
the daily Temple practice as Yahweh planned.

When he, the desert man, was lifted here
(as if he were the highest of High Priests),
what next? Self-sacrifice? The drop is sheer!
Then angel-borne? Or carrion for the beasts?
I was relieved by his refusal — elated,
lest in his downfall I'd be implicated.

The Mountain

Strictly speaking, I'm not quite high enough
to be called a mountain, more like a hill;
though, true, you can see the countryside and stuff
spread out at my foot. It was quite a thrill
when I was chosen as the very spot
from which to view the kingdoms of the earth,
though once again in truth there's not a lot:
just the Roman one for what that's worth.

I've gathered, though, that there are many more
which he then scrutinized with inward eye;
Yet he's decided to ignore (*ignore!*)
the power and glory he's been offered. Why?
I'd like to be the highest mountain, such
that you'd look up to me. That's not asking much.

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)

Closing Prayer

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

We are closing with 'Whatever you want' by Status Quo. This seems to reflect the temptations and challenges we face today. Sorry if you were hoping for a calm and quiet ending!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGUeRbHWNZ4>

Whatever you want
Whatever you like
Whatever you say
You pay your money
You take your choice

Whatever you need
Whatever you use
Whatever you win
Whatever you lose

You're showing off
You're showing out
You look for trouble
Turn around, give me a shout

I take it all
You squeeze me dry
And now today
You couldn't even say goodbye

I could take you home
On the midnight train again
I could make an offer you can't refuse

Whatever you want

Whatever you like
Whatever you say
You pay your money
You take your choice

Whatever you need
Whatever you use
Whatever you win
Whatever you lose

You're showing off
You're showing out
You look for trouble
Turn around, give me a shout

I take it all
You squeeze me dry
And now today
You...

Thanks

Thanks to everyone who has participated, especially to Sheila and Richard for their reflections, Nigel for the music at Communion. Material taken or adapted from other websites has an attribution made where possible.

