

Parish of Central Exeter

5th Sunday of Lent

21st March 2021



Lenten Journeys: Voices from heaven.

Welcome everyone.

Our reflections this morning are by Richard and this evening by Keith. Intercessions are by Betsy. Many thanks.

Welcome to the penitential purple of Lent.

Today is 'Passion Sunday' – the start of a two-week period of preparation specifically for Easter.

The Old Testament reading appointed for today is Jeremiah 31: 32-34

'The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.....I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people..... for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.'

Call to Worship

O God of our Hearts
You yearn to be so close to us
that we can know you in every breath,
in every hope, in every relationship.

Meet us here today and
teach us to recognize
the covenant of justice, peace and love
you have written on our hearts.

So may our desires become your desires,
our work become your work,
and our community
the place where you are sought and found.
In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

(Posted on the United Church of Christ's Worship Ways website)

Gathering Hymn

'Father Lord of all creation' sung here by Collegium Regale. Words on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5fqJaLg3ug>

Preparation for Confession

In the gospel reading for today Jesus says:

'Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.'

God calls us to be like the grain of wheat which dies, which lets go of one form in order to be transformed into new, and fuller life. And yet we often fear the risk and change which new growth involves. Let us ponder for a moment the places of our lives where we may be resisting God moving in our lives.

Prayer of confession

(silence)

When we resist your call to change our hearts
and allow a deepening of relationship:
God have mercy.

When we nurse our wounded hearts
and withhold forgiveness which may transform relationship:
Christ have mercy.

When fear for our own security leads us to close our hearts
from those who are in need:
God have mercy.

Assurance of Grace

The One who makes a covenant on our hearts is faithful and forgives us our sins and failures. In Christ God offers forgiving grace and welcome into a community of trust, abundance and hope.

Let us give thanks for the mercy of God and pass the peace of Christ in community among us.

(From the United Church of Christ's Worship Ways website.)

Collect for the fifth Sunday in Lent

O God, who by the passion of thy blessed Son
hast made the instrument of shameful death
to be unto us the means of life and peace:
Grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ
that we may gladly suffer shame and loss;
for the sake of the same thy Son our Lord. Amen.

(Collect from the Methodist Church)

Gospel Reading John 12: 20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say — 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.



Worship song

‘Lord Jesus Christ, you have come to us.’ Sung here by the choir of Wells Cathedral. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKsbd5UqKkc>

Somewhat random reflections

There are three episodes recounted in the gospels which feature a voice from heaven commending Jesus: at his baptism, at the Transfiguration scene, and in the above account which takes place in the week leading up to his crucifixion. Other bible scenes where a voice from heaven has its say include, notably, Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus, and in the Old Testament Elijah and Ezekiel are both said to have heard the voice of God.

But what are we in the 21st century to make of claims concerning an authoritative voice from heaven? Such happenings appear to be (to mix our metaphors) thin on the ground these days; and even if we were to hear something sounding like such a voice, we would probably dismiss it as an hallucination or, say, a freak peal of thunder which coincidentally vaguely resembled a voice — amusing, but no more significant than a cinnamon bun bearing an alleged Jesus-like image.



In considering this, I was heartened by the morning service reflection of Charles (Edwards) a few weeks ago. Referring to Christ’s baptism, he comments that ‘It’s not clear ... if anyone else but Jesus and John ... 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 Jewish academic Geza Vermes helps us here: he tells us that, according to rabbinic thought, the activity of a voice from heaven (known as a ‘bath kol’) “was confined to testifying to a person’s holiness ... or to conveying a divine command,” rather than unveiling a new revelation. Its function in a biblical account, it would therefore seem, was to emphasise the correctness of the course of action being undertaken (or, in Saul/Paul’s case, a change in his course of action) by the main protagonist. It is an expunger of doubt. The biblical narrator is telling us that we need not — possibly *should* not — doubt the veracity of what we are reading.

Yet there is an element of doubting Thomas in us all. Rightly so. Doubt reduces the possibility of our being played for credulous fools. We need good proof before we accept something which is claimed to be true but which seems weird and/or could have profound implications for us: witness the current very understandable concern many express about being vaccinated. And were any UK politician or medical officer to claim during a daily

pandemic briefing that it's all right because they heard a voice from heaven sanctioning their activities — well, I leave you to finish this sentence.

However, despite the often necessary and understandable doubt we might feel, the experience of absolute certainty still can occur for individuals in some circumstance. Over many decades the Religious Experience Research Unit set up by Sir Alister Hardy has documented thousands of accounts from the general public and from published literature of brief experiences which have brought absolute conviction of a right course of action or, more frequently, a deep but unprovable reassurance. Most accounts are very low key, but some are much more striking: the Methodist preacher Dr Leslie Weatherhead wrote about an experience in the unlikely setting of Vauxhall Station in London on a “murky November Saturday evening” in a railway carriage... “For a few seconds only, I suppose, the whole compartment was filled with light. This is the only way I know in which to describe the moment, for there was nothing to see at all. I felt caught up into some tremendous sense of being within a loving, triumphant and shining purpose... A most curious, but overwhelming sense possessed me and filled me with ecstasy. I felt that all was well with mankind ... I loved everybody in that compartment...”

The experience was fully convincing for Weatherhead, but someone else's experience, however sincerely narrated, can never be fully convincing for one's self. And, for most of us, such experiences, even low key ones, *simply do not usually occur* — at least, not such that we'd notice. Should we therefore assume that God is absent when there's no voice from the sky or Leslie Weatherhead-type experiences to rely on?

Well, no. Absence of evidence, as the cliché goes, is not evidence of absence. Despite there being no heavenly voice directing us, we are called (I use the expression deliberately) to be followers of a man whose words and actions are the best guarantee of his being a window through which we see the nature of deep reality: the ultimate reality he referred to as the Father. We don't actually need a voice from heaven or a transient mystical experience, however reassuring it might be were such to occur. The enduring touchstone for our lives is the man from Nazareth. His words. His actions.

Affirmation of Faith

We believe in Jesus:
who does not carry around a notebook
to write down every foolish mistake we make
or all those hurtful words we offer to others,
but who gathers them up like so much dust
and scatters them to the wind,
inviting us to join hand in hand
in the dance of forgiveness and grace.
(*Lectionary liturgies*)

Prayers for others (as well as ourselves)

Breathe on us, Spirit of God
As we spread our hands before you,
Holding in them the lost, the desperate and the dying.
Holding in them those you have given us to love in our praying,
Holding in them our joys, our hope and our sorrows.
Let the eyes of Christ be fixed on us
And on those for whom we pray.

.
Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer

.
As we rest for this brief moment,
Breathe the spirit of refreshment on us all
That we may be drawn ever deeper into walking
With the man from Nazareth,
The touchstone of our lives,
By whose love we move and pray and delight

Lord, in your mercy
Hear our prayer

We take a moment to hold to God; people of particular concern to us:

those deeply affected by the pandemic, remembering.....

for all who suffer, remembering especially.....

those of our loved ones who have died.....

Merciful Father, *accept these prayers for the sake of your son, 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 music for Passiontide. William Byrd (1540 – 1623) composed much church music, including this 'Agnus Dei' – O Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world – have mercy upon us.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePqqoag8s1E>



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

Lord Jesus Christ,
you have taught us
that what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters
we do also for you:
give us the will to be the servant of others
as you were the servant of all,
and gave up your life and died for us,
but are alive and reign, now and for ever.

Commission and Benediction

He believes in you. The busy world awaits your compassion.

God believes in us.

Sometimes you will give your best yet fail.

God believes in us

At other times you will succeed in spite of your stumbling.

God believes in us

Go gladly, daring to succeed or fail to the glory of God,
and then at the very end, nothing shall dismay you.

God believes in us

With Christ's own breath within us, we shall travel well.

The help of the saving Christ,
the wisdom of the Living God,
and the support of the loving Spirit,
will be with you
every step of the way, now and always.

Amen!

(written by Bruce Prewer)



Closing Music

'O for a closer walk with God'. This is a different version to the one you are used to. It accompanies some beautiful footage taken at Glencoe, Rannoch Moor and the Falls of Dochart. The voices sing in English and Gaelic, and the English words appear on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6PHGXxUOHk>

Scroll down for Coffee Break

Coffee Break

Tuesday 23rd March is the Anniversary of the first lockdown. The Church of England has asked that we regard this date as a National Day of Reflection, and has produced prayers and other resources for churches to use. I became aware of this too late to weave it into the Sunday Services but have included three of the prayers below. You can find more information and resource material at <https://churchsupporthub.org/national-day-of-reflection-2021/>

A prayer for 23 March

God of Love,
As we think about all that has changed this year,
help us to trust that you are always with us.
As we remember those who have died,
help us to trust they are at peace with you.
As we reach out to others with kindness and care,
may hope shine out in every heart and home.
Amen

A prayer for all those affected by coronavirus

Keep us, good Lord,
under the shadow of your mercy
in this time of uncertainty and distress.
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful,
and lift up all who are brought low;
that we may rejoice in your comfort
knowing that nothing can separate us
from your love in Jesus Christ our Lord.

A prayer for all who mourn

Gracious God,
as we remember before you
the thousands who have died,
surround us and all who mourn
with your strong compassion.
Be gentle with us in our grief,
protect us from despair,
and give us grace to persevere
and face the future with hope
in Jesus Christ our risen Lord.
Amen.



Scroll down for Night Prayer

Night Prayer

5th Sunday of Lent
21st March 2021

Returning from the Wilderness



Introduction

Passiontide was the time, when according to St Cyril of Scythopolis (a sixth century monk whose name is surely on all our lips), monks who had chosen to spend some time in the more severe environment of the desert, were able to return to their monasteries.

So, it's worthwhile taking time to consider the ending of the specific temptations of Christ, and his return from the wilderness. Similarly, we should also reflect on the implications for us of returning back from any wilderness or alternative experience to whatever passes as normal. We might also realise that such an experience may be ours as we return from the wilderness of lockdown, sustained by vaccination.

Prayer as Lent winds down

Lent's days are winding down, Merciful God,
and we are no closer to having contrite hearts.
Our small complains still loom large,
and we don't hurry to show mercy, or rush to be kind.

The old habits of Fat Tuesday are still alluring,
and we resist the emptiness of the desert that reveals you –
the places where you make yourself known to us,
where you wait in the quiet for us to be ready, still feel alien.

Yet, Loving God, we come to you,
trying to lose our lives for the life you offer,
seeking the wisdom of our brother Jesus,
hoping to be blown open by the Spirit.

Bring us fully into your Lenten gifts, we pray,
and accept the Lenten gifts we offer to you. Amen.

(written by Rev. Mary Austin and posted on RevGalBlogPals)

This Evening's Music

Our first song tonight is another modern one, reflecting moving out of wilderness and going home.

Going Home by Celtic Woman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vReXxJ1f-v8>

They say there's a place where dreams have all gone
They never said where, but I think I know
It's miles through the night, just over the dawn
On the road that will take me home

I know in my bones, I've been here before
The ground feels the same, though the land's been torn
I've a long way to go, the stars tell me so
On this road that will take me home

Love waits for me round the bend, leads me endlessly on
Surely sorrows shall find their end
And all of our troubles will be gone

And I know what I've lost, and all that I've won
When the road finally takes me home

And when I pass by, don't lead me astray
don't try and stop me, don't stand in my way
I'm bound for the hills where the cool waters flow
On the road that will take me home

Love waits for me round the bend, leads me endlessly on
Surely sorrows shall find their end
And all our troubles will be gone

And I know what I've lost and all that I've won
When the road finally takes me home
I'm going home, I'm going home, I'm going home

Prayer for Lent

O God, who makes all things new,
new stars, new dust, new life;
take my heart,
every hardened edge and measured beat,
and create something new in me.

I need your newness, God,
the rough parts of me made smooth;
the stagnant, stirred;
the stuck, freed;
the unkind, forgiven.

And then, by the power of your Spirit,
I need to be turned toward Love again. Amen.

(Pamela C. Hawkins. From the Prayers and Creeds website)

Reading Matthew 4: 11 (New International Version)

(Having recounted the temptations in the wilderness)...

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Reflection

Matthew closes his account with: Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

It's probably just as well angels turn up, as it's not clear when he leaves the wilderness what he is going back to or how long it will take to get there. Presumably back home to Nazareth, but then what?

So, what did these angels do? Generally we find angels are divine messengers, but in 1 Kings 19: 5-8 we find an angel providing food to the prophet Elijah after he has spent just one day in the wilderness (fleeing from a death threat) and then again very soon afterwards when the food provided is enough to sustain him for forty days whilst he walks to Mt Sinai.

So traditionally commentators considered that Christ's ministering angels were likewise offering him food. Feasting after a significant event was a sign of divine approval. John Bunyan gave full poetic voice to this in *Paradise Regained* (Book 4 lines 581- 595)

.....

So Satan fell; and straight a fiery globe
Of Angels on full sail of wing flew nigh,
Who on their plummy vans received Him soft
From his uneasy station, and upbore,
As on a floating couch, through the blithe air;
Then, in a flowery valley, set him down
On a green bank, and set before him spread
A table of celestial food, divine
Ambrosial fruits fetched from the Tree of Life,
And from the Fount of Life ambrosial drink,

That soon refreshed him wearied, and repaired
What hunger, if aught hunger, had impaired,
Or thirst; and, as he fed, Angelic quires
Sung heavenly anthems of his victory
Over temptation and the Tempter proud:—

Wow! I have to admit I hadn't imagined it quite like that!

But before you pick up the phone to end Lent with some lesser banquet, courtesy of Deliveroo, let's think this one through. Food yes, certainly – but what else?

In the Dennis Potter extract we read in Lent 1, Jesus is asking the question: 'Is it me? Am I the chosen one?' I suggest he accepts that he is the chosen one early on in that scene. If he did not believe he was capable of turning stones into bread, the answer to the challenge would be: 'Don't be stupid, I'm just an ordinary man. I can't do that sort of thing.' But he doesn't. Potter has Jesus say: 'He who is to come and fulfil the prophecies can surely turn stone into — into...' So here he has decided. He is the chosen one, but it will require responding to more than one challenge to bring about full conviction.

Many commentators these days view the whole forty-day experience as a period of working out what he was *not* going to do in his ministry: not turning stones into bread, not jumping off pinnacles nor worshipping satan, whatever these may symbolise.

But these negatives do not constitute a programme for action. He is the chosen one, but what shall he do as a consequence? I would suggest this is where 'the angels ministering' takes on some significance, and we could see this as a time of reflection over the experience, helped, even facilitated, by others.

When I look back over my own life at the various significant experiences I have been through, I am struck by how many times it is by the inputs of others that I have been able to process the experience, make sense of it, and gained new insights into myself. Without these inputs, my life would have been different.

Any experience is simply whatever happens, but is in itself neutral. The gain is from learning from it, and incorporating that into new actions and behaviours, and in my life at any rate, that process has been hugely aided by the ministry of others. These others were not always aware of what they were doing – sometimes it is the chance comment made, least expected, that makes the breakthrough. They were not always people I knew well – the message in the steps of St Stephens about meeting angels unawares reminds us of this.

So, as we move more visibly into Spring, optimistic that the vaccination programme is starting to have a real impact, and that we may be able to enjoy summer, optimistic that we shall recover from all the last year has thrown at us, and however much we feel we are leaving the wilderness behind, we must not forget that optimism itself is not enough, and we need to minister to each other to gain any real benefit.

We Pray

We thank you for glimpses
Of possibilities
We thank you that
No matter how bad things seem
They will come to an end

As we remember that
To everything there is a season
And that seasons follow
One another
No matter what

Even if there are sometimes
More challenges
Even if there are sometimes
Setbacks
That season will end

And we will move into
A different season
One with its own challenges
But also one which
Is filled with joys and blessings

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

Closing Prayer

So as we return from this wilderness
We give you thanks for those angels
In whatever shape they have been
Who have ministered to us
And helped to shape a new vision
of who we might become
and how we might accomplish it.

May we take that into this time of Passiontide
To offer at the empty tomb
And find resurrection.

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 music for Passiontide: Bach's St John Passion – the final chorale. Sung by a virtual choir with signing and a painting taking shape at the same time.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iiP5i4KfkEs>

Thanks

Thanks to everyone who has participated, especially to Richard for his reflections this morning, and Betsy for the intercessions. Material taken or adapted from other websites has an attribution made where possible.



Homeward bound