

worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 18th
February 2024
The First Sunday of Lent
The Revd Dr Susan Durber

Opening Responses

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. - Mark 1:35

*O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you
in a dry and weary land where there is no water. - Psalm 63:1*

God says, 'I will turn the wilderness into pools and dry land into springs of water.'
Isaiah 41:18b

Prayers of Approach and Confession

Eternal God, we are glad to come on this day
to praise you, to listen for your Word,
and to find strength for life in the world.
As we worship, surrounded by your saints,
we open our ears to listen for the Gospel,
our eyes to see the world new
our mouths to sing your praise
and our hearts to receive your love.

Eternal God, at Creation

**you called us into being out of the dust of the earth,
and you stay beside us in every dusty, desert day.
Bless us on a journey into the wilderness,
as we set out on a pilgrimage towards Easter.
May any fasting we do encourage our hunger for justice;
let any of our giving to charity deepen our generosity,
and may extra prayers bring us closer to you.
Let our worship in this service,
be offered in the name of Jesus,
who shares with us the wilderness and the feast,
the ordinary and the holy,
the wonderful everydays of all our lives. Amen.**

God of all mercy and understanding,
we know that we tend to mess things up,
that we cannot tame all that is in us
and that our days are shadowed by regrets.
Sometimes we find ourselves where we do not want to be,
or in a wilderness where we cannot find
the safe and welcome path.

Come to us today. Come and find us where we are.
Forgive us, in your love, where we need it and prepare us for home again.

**God is merciful and full of compassion.
Jesus says, 'Your sins are forgiven'.
With a new heart, set free from wrong and death,
hear the call to abundant life
and live your days in the Kingdom of God.**

The Lord's Prayer

An Introduction/all-age talk

Christ in the wilderness

Stanley Spencer, a British 20th century painter who lived and painted mainly in Cookham, Berkshire, painted a series of paintings called *Christ in the Wilderness*. He painted them at a low point in his own life and in the first months of the second world war. The world, and he, were in a kind of wilderness.

He had planned to paint forty paintings, one for each day of Lent, but in the end he only managed eight. They show Jesus, not so much suffering in a terrible desert, but being close to nature and loving it. This is the wilderness not necessarily as a terrible place, but as a place where God may be found. (You can find them on the internet or readily available in many art books.)

Have a look at his painting of Jesus gazing at the flowers. These are not biblical 'lilies of the field', but the kind of ordinary daisies that anyone in the UK might know well. Jesus seems to be gazing at them, admiring them, spending time just appreciating them. Some people think that Stanley Spencer watched one of his young daughters, as a toddler, playing with flowers and staring at them, and imagined Jesus being rather like a child, absorbed in the wonder of wild flowers, of nature.

Perhaps you could look at some flowers or plants and spend some time just looking... and wondering...

Jesus is not thin in this picture. Why do you think Stanley Spencer might have chosen to paint a Jesus who is well covered?

Where can you find a wild place near where you live to go and explore the natural world?

A Prayer for Illumination

O God, who is beyond all the ways we usually know things,
we rejoice to meet you in the glories of nature,
in our awe on the mountain top or beside the ocean,
through the love that surges at a new birth
or the beauty of a beloved face.
Speak to us now from the scriptures,
that we may hear the revelation of your love
through ancient script and spoken word,
made vivid in the power of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Readings

Psalm 25:1-10 | St Mark 1:9-15

Notes for A Sermon

Psalm 25 gives us words to express some of our own introspection and reflection on our lives, and is thus very appropriate for the first Sunday in the season of Lent. We know little, if anything, about the author of the psalm, but most of us can understand readily the kinds of experiences and feelings that are named here. Many of us, and many in any congregation, will know what it means to suffer from shame, or to have regrets from the past, whether youthful or more recent. To be human is to fail – this is part of the journey of life. We can sense, in the words of the psalm, the experience of bringing such regret and failure before God, the longing to be freed from it, and to be set on a better path. Perhaps at no other time in the Christian year do we intend more explicitly to make a new beginning and to find the path to our better selves. The psalm speaks honestly about shame, but also hopefully about God's mercy, and about the possibility of new starts. This Sunday can be a time, perhaps, to renew our covenant with God, knowing that God's faithfulness and mercy have no end. Sometimes our sense of shame (whatever its source) can leave us wandering in a kind of wilderness, but God offers a path to peace. A deeply pastoral sermon on shame (recognising that shame is not quite the same as guilt – and has many causes) and on God's faithfulness might make a real difference to those who hear it.

St Mark 1:9-15

In a way typical of Mark's Gospel, there is a great deal here packed into only six verses!

It's probably wise to focus on one theme within the passage rather than to try to address everything.

The opening verses are about Jesus' baptism by John. The voice from heaven echoes Psalm 2, in which God chooses a king for the people. But perhaps that is a less helpful reference than the more obvious one – seeing this verse as echoing what any good parent might say to a child, and what some people long to hear from their parents, but do not. There might be those in the congregation who will recognise the power of such words to give any of us a healthy sense of being loved, and those who know that they have been hurt by never hearing such words. What would it mean to know that you are beloved of God, and that God is pleased with you? Could it be that this is what God says to each of us, even perhaps through our own baptism? For some, these verses show that the earliest Christians believed that Jesus became the Son of God at this baptism, rather than at his birth or at the beginning of eternity, but perhaps the important thing is that God declares who Jesus is – and that God is pleased with his message, with his way of living, with all that he was, and is.

The middle section is about the days in the wilderness – much shorter than Matthew or Luke's account, but nonetheless full of significance. It might be important that Jesus goes into the wilderness directly after his baptism, as though perhaps he has to take in the significance of what God has revealed to him and to others. He needs time alone. Or perhaps Mark intends us to remember the people of Israel who went through the Red Sea and then had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years before they could find their home. Jesus is then perhaps something like a new Moses – or a new Israel. And what about the wild beasts? Are we to assume that he is able to be with them without being harmed, like Daniel? Or that he can calm the lions and wolves, as he calms the sea, so that this is a sign of a renewed Creation? And the angels minister to him... Does he sit with good and evil in the same place, or perhaps the tame and the wild? What does it mean that he sits with wild animals and angels? There might be a sermon to be preached in reflection on this, perhaps especially recognising that we, as human beings, can be both wild and angelic...

In the final section, Mark summarises the Gospel message; 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' What do you think this means? Where do you see that the kingdom of God has come near – where you are? What is the role of repentance in this? (Remember that in Greek, the word here may not be so much about confessing your sins, but about seeing the world in a completely different way). If you had to summarise the 'message', the good news, what would you say? What does your neighbourhood need to hear as good news?

Affirmation of Faith

**We believe in God,
who finds us in desert places
and who ministers to us in our emptiness.**

**We believe in Jesus Christ,
who entered the desert to bring us new life.
We believe in the Holy Spirit,
who is with us in the solitary space of our honest selves.
We believe that God is with us,
and that every desert will blossom when God's day comes. Amen**

Prayers of Thanksgiving and of Intercession for the World

We come with our thanks for all the good things;
for the beauty of the natural world,
glimpsed in mountains and sunsets,
and in dandelions and daisies;
for the warmth of human love,
whenever we find it and whoever we are stirred to love;
for the thrill of discovery and curiosity,
of new things learned and gifts we can share;
for the pleasures of life, known in laughter and company,
in good food and the tiredness of a fulfilling day.
For all that merits our heartfelt thanks,
we express now our gratitude and joy.

In sorrow, we recognise that life is not always joy,
and that many; human beings, creatures and all things,
may suffer injury, hurt, and pain.

We pray for all those who do not ever see much beauty;
those in prison, or working in buildings with little light,
people deep in depression or those abused by others.

We pray for those who live in the pain of grief,
or who have suffered such a trauma that they are afraid,
for all whose days feel beyond their control.

We pray for those for whom hunger is physical and painful,
those made poor by ruthless economies or cruel wars,
all enslaved to hard and relentless labour.

God of the garden and the desert,
of all pain and every joy,
be with each of us in the wild places
and send your angels to bless us.

Give us grace and courage too,
to accompany those in any kind of wilderness

and to offer blessings where we can.

We offer these prayers, in the name of Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, Amen.

Offertory Prayer

O God, we offer to you today
this portion of what we have,
but let it stand for all that we have, all that we are, all that we can do,
to make this earth more like heaven, your people more joyful
and bring peace to all Creation, Amen.

Blessing

May God bless you this Lent,
with a generous heart,
a peaceful spirit,
an open mind, and a deepening faith.

The blessing of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with you. Amen.

Hymns Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Lead us heavenly father lead us	543			400
Forty days and forty nights		337	236	160
Songs of thankfulness and praise	191			
O matchless beauty of our God	101			
The kingdom of God is justice and joy	200		255	651
Father hear the prayer we offer	495	255	518	132
Nothing distress you	548			
The Day of the Lord shall come	637			
One more step along the world I go	549	530	476	1346
Who would true valour see	557	535	486	224
Guide me O thou great Redeemer	345	167	465	201
Out of the flowing river		335		
The great love of God is revealed in the Son	105	358		
Meekness and majesty		356	362	465

RS – Rejoice & Sing | CH4 – Church Hymnary 4 | StF – Singing the Faith | MP – Mission Praise