

worship notes

from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 22nd February 2026

The first Sunday in Lent

The Rev'd Dr Lance Stone

Call to Worship

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

**Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.**

While I kept silent, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

For day and night your hand was heavy upon me:

my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity:

I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD."

and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Psalm 32: 1-5*

Opening Prayer of Approach, Confession and Pardon

O gracious and holy God,
eternal trinity of glory,
dwelling in love and joy and peace,
before time and beyond time
and far above and beyond us;
in Jesus Christ you have laid aside that glory
and come amongst us,
become vulnerable, living life in our shoes,
exposed to hunger and pain and to temptation,
feeling our joys and sorrows
and holding fast and faithful to the one who sent you.

We praise and worship you and rejoice in your solidarity with us.

For we live in this troubled world,
where we find it hard to distinguish what we can do
from what we should do;
and in seeking life we make foolish choices
and fall far short of who we truly are.
So we come seeking forgiveness and grace to
emend our lives.

Assurance of Pardon

Lord Jesus Christ,
second Adam come to undo sin's curse,
assure us that we are beloved and forgiven
and give us grace to walk your way,
for we pray in your name and in your words,
saying together... (The Lord's Prayer)

All Age Activity

The focus of the service, at the start of Lent, is sin and temptation – with Jesus' time of temptation in the wilderness in mind. Suggested ways in:

- Read the account in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* of the White Witch's tempting Edmund to betray the other children, using Turkish Delight (chapter 4, pages 41-44, Harper Collins Children's Books: you will need to set the scene and possibly edit it slightly). Good example of temptation: targeting Edmund's weakness, just as the devil does with Jesus in today's reading from Matthew, playing on areas where he was weak and needed to be strong and resist. Do we know the places where we are sometimes weak and can be tempted? The season of Lent can be a time to recognise such things in our lives and to ask for strength.
- Ask for a volunteer (preferably a child) to arm wrestle with you. Sit opposite each other each with a table between you, each with an elbow on the table. Clasp hands and try to force your opponent's hand down onto the table. If you play it with a child, let them win (you may not have to let them!). This is a way of testing your strength: maybe you need to develop your muscles and get a bit stronger. In our story this morning from the Gospels we read of how Jesus had his strength tested: how strong he was in resisting temptations to do certain things that he knew were not what God wanted him to do. Again, Lent can be a time to recognise where we need help to be stronger.
- If you have access to Powerpoint, go onto Google images and find Mr Angry, Mr Grumpy, Mr Greedy, Mr Lazy – talk a little about each and say how they can represent possible temptations and sins which we might need to address in our lives – Lent is traditionally a time when we try to identify and face up to temptations like these, as Jesus was doing when he was tempted by the devil in our reading from Matthew's Gospel.

Prayer for Illumination

Living God,
Open our ears and our hearts to your Word,
that we may not live by bread alone
but by every word that proceeds from your mouth. Amen.

Readings

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 | Romans 5:12-19 | St Matthew 4:1-11

Sermon Notes

Theme: Falling short

Sermon structure:

a) Intro:

The setting of the season of Lent, when we commemorate Jesus' fasting in the wilderness and his wrestling with 'the unholy trinity' of sin, the flesh and the devil.

b) Exegesis of Matthew 4:1-11; Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-17:

The context of Jesus' baptism where his identity has been declared as God's Son, 'my Beloved.' The temptations that follow test what it means to be God's Son, the Beloved... inviting Jesus to give into *the flesh* (turning stones into bread); to give into *sin* (putting God to the test by leaping from the temple); to give in to *the devil* by bowing down to him. Question: what do we learn here about the nature of sin. What is sin?

Explore the idea of sin as 'falling short'. The Adam and Eve story is rightly referred to as 'The Fall' for when we see the consequences of their disobedience that follow in the story – Adam and Eve ashamed and hiding from God, followed by blame, recrimination, estrangement and curse – we see them 'falling short' of the glory for which they have been created. And the Matthew passage with its context of Jesus' baptism followed by the testing in the wilderness reminds us of Israel's experience of the exodus, when they passed through the waters of the Red Sea followed by the time in the wilderness – and when a whole generation 'fell short' of reaching the Promised Land due to their disobedience.

In the Matthew narrative the temptations are very subtle. They are all about means and ends: worthy ends but unworthy means which would mean falling short of the full goal of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' vision is far greater. Note the superlative language of our Romans reading describing what Jesus has done, with phrases like 'out of all proportion' and 'vastly exceeded'. Jesus comes to expand the horizons of Adam's shrunken world.

Application:

Consider 'falling short' as a motif of our contemporary society, where the self-help industry is founded on anxiety about falling short and missing our true potential: top selling titles on Amazon such as 'Self Help: this is your chance to change your life'; or 'Love Better, Feel Better, Live Better', or 'Think Faster, Talk Smarter'. These represent salvation for a secular age and may be of some help to some but ultimately feed into an obsession with more efficient, more productive, more successful lives – precisely the terms the devil was offering Jesus.

c) Conclusion:

Jesus' sinlessness might be construed in these positive terms: a life that revealed the full dimensions of what it means to be human. The season of Lent is an opportunity for us to consider where our lives are in danger of falling short.

Prayers of Intercession

Living God, your love for us, your children, is far beyond our understanding. You have created and fashioned us in love, and set your holy image upon us, and exalted us to be your Beloved in whom you delight. And yet we have fallen, and continue to fall so far short of what you have made us to be.

We think today of all that diminishes and demeans human life: the curse of war that shatters people's lives; the horror of poverty that leaves people struggling to live; the outrage of injustice that allows the powerful to prey on the powerless; the relentless greed whereby some hoard while others are left to fight for the crumbs from under their tables.

O God we pray today for those in positions of power and authority: for rulers and governments, that they might strive for the common good and to create a society where all may flourish.

We pray for those who are held back by their upbringing, or constrained by their circumstances and by forces over which they have no control. We pray for those whose lives are blighted by addiction, who have lost the strength to resist things that destroy them.

We pray for your church throughout the world and especially in our own country, asking you to bring renewal. May your church be a place where people hungry for the bread of life are fed; where people whose lives are diminished find their worth; where those who have fallen short are raised up and find strength to live well.

Hear us as in a moment of silence we name before you nay who are on our hearts today...

We pray all these things in the name of the One who came that we might have life, and have it abundantly – Jesus Christ or Lord. Amen.

Offertory Prayer

For all that blesses and enriches our lives,
we give you thanks.

May our gratitude be expressed
in lives of trust and obedience:

**Take us and all that you have given us
and use us in the service of your Kingdom. Amen**

Blessing

May God be above you,
and God beside you,
and heaven all around you
as you journey on;
and may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy spirit,
be with you all, today and always. **Amen**

Suggested Hymns

	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Forty days and forty nights		337	236	160
Jesus, lover of my soul	332	490	355	372
You are my hiding place				793
Jesus, tempted in the desert		338	237	
Before the throne of God above		466		975
Seek ye first the kingdom of God	512	641	254	590
Praise to the holiest in the height	103	378	334	563
God, who made the earth		228		
How Deep the Father's Love For Us		549		988
Break thou the bread of life	314		153	64
As the deer pants for the water		550	544	37
Jesus thou joy of loving hearts	389	662		
Guide me O thou great Jehovah	345	167	465	201

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