



Sunday 21st February 2021

This short act of worship has been prepared for you as we are not able to meet for worship in our church buildings as per normal. If you are well enough why not spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with. If you would like to, light a candle to represent God's light in the world's darkness and place it nearby.

Introductory material

"Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves." So wrote the apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians. And there, in a nutshell, is a perfect summary of what this season of Lent is all about – a time for self-examination, for looking honestly and openly at the state of our Christian lives. Just as Jesus was tested in the wilderness, so we too need to test ourselves. Just as he wrestled with temptations, so we too must wrestle with the things that may destroy our relationship with God. Just as he had to come to terms with what God expected of him, so we too have to seek God's guidance and ask for grace to accept his will.

Opening Prayer

We come before you Almighty God, ever mindful that you have called us as your own. Lead us in your truth and teach us your paths of steadfast love and righteousness. Amen.

StF 465: 'Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah'
Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=v=5j48TLIRb4Q

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
hold me with thy powerful hand:
Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven,
feed me now and evermore;
feed me now and evermore.

Open thou the crystal fountain
whence the healing stream shall flow;
let the fiery, cloudy pillar
lead me all my journey through:
strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer,
be thou still my strength and shield;
be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan
bid my anxious fears subside;
death of death, and hell's destruction,
land me safe on Canaan's side:
songs of praises, songs of praises,
I will ever give to thee;
I will ever give to thee.

William Williams (1717-1791)

Let us pray together

Living God, on this first Sunday of Lent we come together seeking your presence, offering our worship, and asking for guidance.

Lord, in your mercy *hear our prayer.*

We come, remembering once more the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, and his refusal to give way.

Lord, in your mercy *hear our prayer.*

We come remembering those forty days and nights of trial, that time of prayer and meditation, preparation for the future.

Lord, in your mercy *hear our prayer.*

We come remembering the life, the death, the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus that followed.

Lord, in your mercy *hear our prayer.*

Living God, help us, learning from his example, to use this season wisely, making time to hear your voice and reflect on your word.

Lord, in your mercy *hear our prayer.*

Help us to honestly examine ourselves, carefully and prayerfully searching our hearts.

Lord, in your mercy *hear our prayer.*

Help us to see ourselves as we really are, and as you would have us to be, ready to follow you and do your will, no matter what the cost.

Lord, in your mercy *hear our prayer.*

Help us to know where we are faithful to you and where we fail, recognising our strengths and weaknesses.

Lord, in your mercy *hear our prayer.*

Living God, give us courage to stand before your searching gaze and accept your verdict, humility to accept your correction and receive

your forgiveness, wisdom to hear your word and feed on it through faith. So in the days ahead may we grow closer you to in the likeness of Christ.
Lord, hear our prayer, for we ask it in Christ's name. Amen.

The First Sunday of Lent, The Collect
O LORD, who for our sake did fast forty days and forty nights; Give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey your godly motions in righteousness, and true holiness, to your honour and glory, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. *Amen.*

Today's Reading from the Old Testament:
Genesis 9:8-17

Today's Gospel Reading: Mark 1:9-15

Time to reflect

"And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

I know from personal experience what it is like to be in the wilderness. As part of my first degree in 'Archaeology of the Eastern Mediterranean' at Liverpool University, I took part in an archaeological excavation of the terrace of a cave which attested to the beginnings of animal and plant domestication. It was pretty much in wilderness terrain. One of the things we had to do was remove rocks from the site before we could begin to dig, but advisedly the site director told us to be careful in how we removed these rocks, for it was very possible that scorpions were lurking underneath them. And so it proved. Scorpions are very much part of the wilderness in the land of Israel.

We have now entered the part of the Christian Year known as Lent, a time when we remember Jesus being in the wilderness for forty days and nights before he began his public ministry. In his wilderness experience, it was as if he faced everything the evil forces of this world could throw against him in an intensified manner perhaps only comparable to his wrestlings in Gethsemane when he sweat great drops of blood. The expression Mark uses here, "he was with the wild beasts" is an apt description of these evil forces which could be described as unpredictable, unstable, irrational.

There is a painting by Stanley Spencer called 'The Scorpion' now in a museum in Australia, part of a series of forty paintings called 'Christ in the Wilderness' which Spencer never

managed to complete. What fascinates me about the painting is though the scorpion looks as if it is about to bite Christ, he cups it in his hands and seems to take the sting out of its tail in the process.

Perhaps for Spencer the scorpion was symbolic of all the evil destructive forces this world knows, in other words that pose a spiritual danger, but that unlike the normal human response of creating a cycle of violence, Jesus responded quite differently. Indeed he shows us that there is another way, a way to nullify the spiritual dangers which may affect our lives and cause us to fear.

But that is only one side of the story. We are also told that in the wilderness – an image John Bunyan used in Pilgrim's Progress to describe the world in which we go through – there are also angels: "and the angels waited on him". This seems to me to counterbalance what we read previously, "he was with the wild beasts". And thank God that in our world with all its chaos and dangers, there are the angels of mercy that spread light to all around.

Is there not evidence of these angels as well as of the wild beasts in our world today? All the great acts of benevolence, philanthropy, and care throughout our world? People helping each other and giving a lending hand. Our world is not all bad nor is it all good either.

Some of the evil forces are actually named in Matthew's account of the temptations in the wilderness. First of all, there is the evil force of what could be called 'greed'. The evil one said, "If you are the Son of God, Turn these stones into bread" .. In one of his classic songs *Blind Willie McTell*, Bob Dylan wrote:

*Well, God is in His heaven
And we all want what's his
But power and greed and corruptible seed
Seem to be all that there is.*

One of the things that is all too evident in our world today is greed, a concern which goes way beyond religious circles. Does not our western culture put so much emphasis on possessions as if they give us our identity and worth?

Jesus in response to the force of greed said, "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." In our words, he put our spiritual needs first. Perhaps in this time of Lent we could use it to readdress the balance between looking after our physical and spiritual needs. The psalmist knew what was priority: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." Said Jesus, "Seek first the kingdom of God; and all these other things will be added to you."

Secondly, there is the evil force of what could be called *irresponsibility*— "If you are the Son

of God, throw yourself off the temple for the angels will bear you up.” Jesus was tempted to presume on God’s care by throwing himself off the highest pinnacle of the temple. Here I suggest the temptation was along the lines of allowing one’s emotions to get the better of one’s reason, in other words to be a bit of a dare-devil, but therein lay the danger. It would have been suicidal of Jesus if he had given into this dark thought. Yes he knew God cared for him, but he had to take responsibility for his behaviour. This is not to deny the place of risk-taking but neither should it drive us to irresponsible behaviour. We can see such behaviour in our world today, and I am thinking of certain footballers here whose actions can only be described as stupid and selfish as they have potentially put other lives at risk, and no wonder people with any sanity cry foul play.

Finally there is the evil force of what could be described as ‘*self-appointed power*’—“I will give you all this power if you will bow down and worship me.” Jesus was tempted to gain power at the expense of remaining in submission to God by bowing down to the evil force of self-aggrandizement. But Jesus would have none of it. He knew that refusal to give into this powerful temptation would put him on a path of collision with the powers that be. But he chose to remain submissive to God “for the joy that was set before him, even enduring the cross despising the shame.”

We too can be faced with temptations to self-aggrandizement which are not of God’s own choosing for our lives. This does not mean that God will not open up for us positions of responsibility in the public arena but the last thing God would have of us is to become proud and arrogant in the process.

There is the Old Testament example of Nebuchadnezzar the powerful king of the Babylonian empire who set up a golden statue of himself and commanded everyone in the empire to bow down to it. Later he said, “Is this not magnificent Babylon, which I have built as a royal capital by my mighty power and for the honour of my glorious majesty?” What was the end result? “He was driven away from human society, ate grass like oxen, and his body was bathed with the dew of heaven, until his hair grew as long as eagle’s feathers and his nails became like bird’s claws.” Yes, “Look how the mighty have fallen!” It is only when Nebuchadnezzar lifted his eyes to heaven and blessed the most High God that his reason returned to him and he was established (Dan 4:36).

Returning to Spencer’s painting, note Jesus’s response to the threats of evil and danger. For one thing he held it at arm’s length. But

moreover, he did not respond like-for-like. The scorpion is angry; but Jesus looked on with compassion.

In my experience, I respected the wilderness with its inherent dangers and listened intently to what the site-director told me. Jesus also took the evil forces in the wilderness seriously but the point I would make here is *he controlled his fear by his faith*. He understood the fear of danger but the fear never overcame him.

Our lives at present can very much feel like a wilderness experience tempting us also to fear and possibly even despair. But in the wilderness of life there are also the “angels descending that bring from above, echoes of mercy whispers of love.” God can set a table before us even in the wilderness and say to our fears no matter how legitimate they are, “Be gone.”

Like Nebuchadnezzar we can be led to say in the wilderness of our lives, “Praise and glory and honour be to you King of heaven, for all your works are truth and your ways are just.” Amen.

Take a time to sit quietly.

StF 237: ‘Jesus, tempted in the desert’
Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here: [Jesus, Tempted in the Desert - YouTube](#)

Jesus, tempted in the desert,
lonely, hungry, filled with dread;
‘Use the power,’ the tempter tells him;
‘Turn these barren rocks to bread!’
‘Not alone by bread,’ he answers,
‘Can the human heart be filled.
Only by the Word that calls us
is our deepest hunger stilled!’

Jesus, tempted at the temple,
High above its ancient wall:
‘Throw Yourself from lofty turret;
Angels wait to break Your fall!’
Jesus shuns such empty marvels,
Feasts that fickle crowds request:
‘God, whose grace protects, preserves us,
We must never vainly test.’

Jesus, tempted on the mountain
By the lure of vast domain:
‘Fall before me! Be my servant!
Glory, fame You’re sure to gain!’
Jesus sees the dazzling vision,
Turns his eyes another way:
‘God alone deserves our homage!
God alone will I obey!’

When we face temptation's power,
Lonely, struggling, filled with dread,
Christ, who knew the tempter's hour,
Come and be our living bread.

By Your grace, protect, preserve us
Lest we fall, Your trust betray.
Yours, above all other voices,
Be the Word we hear, obey.

Herman G. Stuempfle (1923-2007)

A time of prayer

Lord God, we pray for those who find themselves in restricted spaces and unexpected places...
We pray for places affected by climate change, areas where water is scarce and crops fail, places where flooding is affecting people's homes...

We pray for those who are homeless and have lost everything through earthquake or fire...

We pray for those who wait for medical results, for those who are ill in hospital or at home...

For those who have lost their jobs and those who await news about benefits...

We pray for our healthcare workers, nurses and doctors, essential service workers, teachers and police...

For our children whose education has been so badly affected, and parents who are juggling time constraints...

For those who are grieving the loss of loved ones...

For religious leaders and funeral parlours who minister to the bereaved...

For those who are working on the Vaccine rollout, scientists, government leaders, economists, and medical aid associations...

Breathe new life into your people and all circumstances as we approach Easter, may we always know your presence with us. Amen.

Let us say The Lord's Prayer: Our Father ...

StF 236: 'Forty days and forty nights'
Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here: [Forty days and forty nights: Portsmouth Cathedral 1984 \(Anthony Froggatt\) - YouTube](#)

Forty days and forty nights
You were fasting in the wild;
Forty days and forty nights
Tempted and yet undefiled.

Shall not we your trials share
learn your discipline of will;
And with you by fast and prayer
Wrestle with the powers of hell?

So if Satan, pressing hard,
Soul and body would destroy,
Christ who conquered, be our guard;
Give to us the victor's joy.

Watching, praying, struggling thus,
Victory shall be ours too;
Angels minister to us,
As they ministered to you.

Saviour, may we hear your voice;
Keep us constant at your side,
And with you we may appear
At the eternal Eastertide.

George Hunt Smythian (1822-1870)
Adap. by Jubilate Hymns

A prayer of blessing

May Almighty God, who has called us by His grace bless and keep us by confirming and strengthening us through Jesus Christ, our Lord, and fill us with the power of the Holy Spirit to be His instruments of peace in the world. Amen.

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