

SUNDAY REFLECTIONS

Sunday 21 February 2021 | The First Sunday of Lent

TODAY'S READINGS

Genesis 9.8-17 | Psalm 25.1-9 | I Peter 3.18-22 | Mark 1.9-15



'Christ in the Wilderness'

by Ioan Kramskoy (1872)

‡ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I think its probably quite understandable that many of us will have greeted the beginning of Lent with a little less expectation and hopefulness than usual. I realise that seasons of penitence, fasting and self-denial aren't necessarily the times of the church year that we look forward to the most, but this year there is the added, perhaps unique pressure, that this past year or so has felt like one long sojourn through the wilderness days of Lent.

The pandemic has dramatically changed the way we've lived, acted and thought. We've been for the most part locked away in our houses, restricted in where we could go and what we could do, prevented from seeing those we love most, we've endured near-constant stress, anxiety and worry, the dreadful rise of infection rates and the numbers of the dead hard to wrap our heads around. Living under a cloud of uncertainty and fear that is only now, slowly and cautiously beginning to lift as we look to an all too different future, that will be nothing like the past we once knew.

And now, to top it all off, just as the vaccination programme continues to gather momentum, Lent arrives and with the dust and ash of Ash Wednesday we are thrown back once again onto contemplating our finite smallness, our transience, our mortality and fragility as human beings. Summoned to seek God and the life he offers through fasting, acts of service, prayer and meditating on his holy word. To use the weeks that lie ahead as a means by which we can be prepared for the undiluted joys of Easter.

I think its right and good to acknowledge the reticence we might be feeling as we look ahead into the weeks of Lent. Not only because God appreciates it when we are honest and truthful, when we share the thoughts and intentions of our hearts; but primarily, because it allows us to reject those things that Lent is not. It can be tempting to see this season with all its talk of sin and transgression as a time to feel purposefully guilty. A time for misery that shines a light on the times we fall short and fail. The forty days of preparation for Easter interpreted as a time of gloom and darkness, something well and good for the particularly religiously zealous, but for the most of us best avoided.

And yet, when we see Lent in this way, I can't help feel that we are getting it all wrong. When actually what we are invited to is a season of joyful renewal and repentance. A journey that re-orientates our lives and prayers around what matters most and so should help us find fulfilment and deeper contentment in the God who in Jesus is the source of our joy and hope. In preparing to mark and remember the events of Jesus' death and resurrection, the story of love unknown on

which our faith is built, we consider again that ultimately a Lenten pilgrimage is about a return to the God in whom we find belonging. A call to a deeper conversion of heart and mind, that seeks to shatter our spiritual complacency and so renew within us the image of the one we seek to follow.

In the three gospel narratives that tell of Jesus' baptism, the revelation of his identity as Son of God at the Jordan, a moment of divine affirmation and commission at the outset of his public ministry, the story is quickly followed by the account of Jesus' experiences of temptation, trial and torment in the desert. In response to the preaching of John, Jesus appears from obscurity from his home in Nazareth, is baptised and then suddenly withdraws from everyone and everything, sent out, hurled out into the desert for forty days and nights.

Whereas Matthew and Luke give us the account of the individual temptations Jesus faced, Mark's gospel, with its usual brevity, keeps the details to a minimum, telling us only that Jesus was '*tempted by Satan*', his only companions the wild animals of the wilderness and the angels who attended upon him. Though we might imagine Jesus' baptism to be an occasion for celebration, the reality tells us otherwise, no sooner has the dove descended and the voice from heaven spoken, that we find Jesus on his own, separated from all comfort and companionship. Forced to face the reality of what was being asked of him, the mission with which he had been entrusted, in difficult and demanding surroundings.

There doesn't seem to be any indication from the evangelist that Jesus was prepared or knew what was to come, that he had time to gather his things or plan for the future. Rather, Mark tells us, that Jesus was '*driven out*' into the wilderness '*immediately*', sent out not of his own choosing but rather by '*the Spirit*'. The same Spirit that empowered the Son for ministry at the river now forces him out into the barrenness and desolation of the desert.¹ Jesus' experiences presented not as an unfortunate turn of events, but rather a means by which he might know God's will in adversity, a test of his willingness and humility in submitting himself in obedience to the Father whose love was proclaimed at his baptism.

The wilderness then, a time of enforced separation, self-reflection and limitation, of disorientation and confusion, of serious questioning and doubting, is plainly a context which we understand well after after all that we've suffered together through this pandemic. An experience which has brought us face-to-face with so many disturbing and challenging realities about ourselves, our communities and the world in which we live. But contrary to popular belief, the bleakness of the desert is never intended as a place where God is understood as being absent, where somehow his

¹ J. R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), p 39.

grace or guidance is diminished or hidden. Instead, despite the need for Jesus to demonstrate prayerful endurance and perseverance, it is a context in which God is revealed and known. That even when the wild animals of mistrust, forsakenness and disappointment threaten to assault us, the angels of mercy and peace draw near to us.

More than anything the desert is a place where our faithfulness can be tested, where Jesus' own commitment was threatened. An environment where amid all that seeks to destabilise and topple us, God is revealed as completely and utterly faithful; who does not abandon us however dark things appear, whose consolation is sufficient to sustain us in all weakness and faltering. In Christ we see God confronting the loneliness and separation we so often feel and experience, convincing us that as we face life's challenges and though we might presume to think otherwise, the fidelity of our God is resolutely steadfast.

Just as in Genesis, when following the days of a flood, God declares a covenant to Noah and his family that promises life to the whole earth and everything in it. In Jesus, we see God's new covenant of love enacted and physically present. A promise disclosed not by a rainbow set in the sky, but in the flesh and blood of incarnation, the invisible made visible. The assurance that we are never abandoned, not even when our circumstances seem cruel and unrelenting, when we sense we're at our lowest ebb and feel our prayers are unheard and unheeded.

We might not feel in the mood for Lent and for all that lies ahead as we journey to the cross and then onto the empty tomb. We might think it's all too much: that we need comfort more than contrition and praise instead of penitence, a feeling that we've already been walking through the desert for far too long. And yet, despite all this, God still meets us, the Spirit directs us and Jesus beckons us to walk the way he has trod before. The one in whom the good news of God is revealed, and who despite our concerns understands all that we might be feeling.

If Lent is about anything, it's foremost about binding our lives more closely to Christ, turning towards him, letting him speak and so finding in his service our freedom. All this, we pray, will lead us closer to God, so as to be led into deeper, steadier, fuller relationship with our Lord and Saviour who, even in the wilderness, is waiting for us; reminding us that even there, by knowing him close, we will have nothing to fear.

✠ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Collect
for The First Sunday of Lent

Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:
give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit;
and, as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Old Testament Reading

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

Genesis 9.8-17

Gospel Reading

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

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.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

Mark 1.9-15

'Stones into Bread' by *Malcolm Guite*
from Sounding the Seasons (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2012)

The Fountain thirsts, the Bread is hungry here
The Light is dark, the Word without a voice.
When darkness speaks it seems so light and clear.
Now He must dare, with us, to make a choice.
In a distended belly's cruel curve
He feels the famine of the ones who lose
He starves for those whom we have forced to starve
He chooses now for those who cannot choose.
He is the staff and sustenance of life
He lives for all from one Sustaining Word
His love still breaks and pierces like a knife
The stony ground of hearts that never shared,
God gives through Him what Satan never could;
The broken bread that is our only food.

Prayers of Intercession during Lent

- * *for a renewal in holiness in these days of Lent, that following Christ into the wilderness, we might be renewed in God's gifts of faith, hope and love;*
- * *for the world which God has made and for all those who cry out in pain or distress, we remember all those who are oppressed, who are victims of the greed and hatred of others, praying that we might see peace, justice and righteousness flourish in these days of trial and testing;*
- * *for all those who feel isolated, afraid or alone during this time of pandemic, that the God who in Christ journeys with us through sorrow and hardship might bring relief and comfort in affliction and distress;*
- * *for those struggling to find hope, who feel abandoned or forgotten, who struggle to know the way ahead, that God might draw close to them with grace and guidance;*
- * *for all working to support and care for others in so many different ways, that they may know God's blessing and protection;*
- * *for all whom we love and care for, our families, friends and neighbours, especially those who are physically far away from us, remembering those who have no-one to pray for them, that we might be united in the Lord's love for us all;*
- * *for our homes, that they may be places of safety, security and peace;*
- * *for all who are sick or suffering, those known to us and those known to God alone, that they may know Christ's healing and wholeness in body, mind and spirit;*
- * *for the departed, and all who mourn and grieve the loss of loved ones, that as we journey towards Easter we might know the joy and hope of the risen Jesus, in whose death and resurrection we find the gift of life everlasting;*
- * *for generosity, discernment and perseverance in these Lenten days, that we might take up our cross and follow Christ and so be refreshed in the promises of God's unfailing mercy.*

THE SUNDAY SUPPLEMENT

CHURCH OF ENGLAND RESOURCES

<https://www.churchofengland.org/>

<https://soundcloud.com/the-church-of-england>

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>

<https://www.youtube.com/thechurchofengland>



The Church of England online weekly service for the First Sunday of Lent can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/c/TheChurchofEngland/videos>

DAILY HOPE PHONE LINE

The Church of England has developed a national **free** phone line to help support those who might feel particularly isolated at this time, especially if they have no access to the internet. The phone number is **0800 804 8044** and provides a collection of readings, prayers and hymns that can be listened to, all of which are updated regularly. If you know of anyone who might appreciate this service, please do let them know the phone number and pray that it will be a blessing to many.



ENGAGING THEOLOGY CUMBRIA

<https://engaging-theology-in-cumbria.org>

Engaging Theology in Cumbria is delighted to launch a series of seminars for 2021 on Zoom, to which all are welcome! In this series, eight theologians explore hope and fear in mission, theological education, the arts, the climate crisis, education, and more, in a Zoom-based series of talks and group discussions that are inclusive, accessible, mission-focused, and, above all, hopeful. The next seminar takes place on **Monday 8 March at 7.30pm** when the Reverend Dr Edmund Newey, Rector of Rugby, will speak on *'This metaphor is no way out: Some Poetry of Hope, drawing on Norman Nicholson and others'*.



If you would like to attend or find out more please visit <https://engaging-theology-in-cumbria.org/events/this-metaphor-is-no-way-out-some-poetry-of-hope-drawing-on-norman-nicholson-and-others-edmund-newey/> and complete the online booking form. You will then be sent a link to join the seminar via Zoom.

PRAYER FOR THE NATION

<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/call-prayer-nation>

The Archbishops of Canterbury and York have called the whole church and nation to join them in praying each day at **6.00pm** as we continue to navigate our way through the anxious and uncertain times of the pandemic. Please see guidance for this time of prayer below.



*'We write to you then in consolation, but also in encouragement, and ultimately in the hope of Jesus Christ. The God who comes to us in Jesus knew grief and suffering himself. On the cross, Jesus shares the weight of our sadness. We therefore encourage everyone who is feeling scared, or lost or isolated to cast their fears on God... **One thing we can all do is pray. More than ever, this is a time when we need to love each other. Prayer is an expression of love.***

KENT ESTUARY MISSION COMMUNITY - LENT GATHERINGS 2021

As church communities across the Kent Estuary we are planning on coming together as a Mission Community for a time of shared Bible study and fellowship through the coming weeks of Lent.

We will be following the Lenten materials that have been prepared for helping us understand the new county-wide vision for God's Church here in Cumbria. A vision that is there to inspire our work and witness as churches and as individuals in following in the way of Jesus Christ.



This refreshed God for All vision has four themes:

follow daily | speak boldly | care deeply | tread gently

Over the coming weeks we'll have the opportunity to meet and reflect together, spending time thinking about how this vision might guide us collectively in our mission and ministry and also how we might draw closer to God in this season of penitence and preparation.

We will meet on Tuesday evenings during Lent, beginning on **Tuesday 23 February**, from **7.00pm** on **Zoom**, using the link: <http://bit.ly/KEMCLent>

Tuesday 23 February - God For All

Tuesday 2 March - Follow Daily

Tuesday 9 March - Speak Boldly

Tuesday 16 March - Care Deeply

Tuesday 23 March - Tread Gently



The booklet for the Lent Gatherings can be found here: [http://www.beethamstmichaelandallangels.co.uk/users/UserFiles/File/2020/2021/God%20for%20All%20Vision%20-%20Lent%20Gathering%20Materials%20\(2021\).pdf](http://www.beethamstmichaelandallangels.co.uk/users/UserFiles/File/2020/2021/God%20for%20All%20Vision%20-%20Lent%20Gathering%20Materials%20(2021).pdf)

Please do join us as we pray for God to bless us and inspire us in the weeks ahead.

Prayer for the Nation

Everyday at 6.00pm

The suggested prayer intentions for each day are:

Sunday – family, friends, and loved ones.

We lift to God those we hold in our hearts – praying for their health, their well-being and their sense of hope.

We pray that even when loved ones cannot physically be together they would not feel apart.

We ask for God's help in our communicating, our connecting and our caring.

Monday – schools and colleges, children, and young people.

We pray for all those involved in the shaping of young lives.

We give God thanks for the sacrifice and commitment of teachers and all those involved in serving children and young people in education.

We pray that all might be nurtured and cared for and that every needful resource would be made available – that all lives can flourish even in these difficult times and that no-one would be overlooked.

Tuesday – the elderly, those who are isolated and the vulnerable.

We echo God's commitment to those most at risk of this virus by praying today for those who are particularly vulnerable and isolated: praying for their deliverance, protection and comfort.

We hold before God those who care for them – that they would be strengthened and encouraged in this work.

Wednesday – businesses, workplaces, and economic wellbeing.

In this time of great challenge, we pray for the economic wellbeing of the country.

We remember before God those who face great uncertainty in their work.

We lift before God those who have lost their jobs and face an uncertain and difficult future.

We pray for a renewed commitment to our common life together.

Thursday – the NHS and all key workers.

Our God is the great healer – and the agent used more than any other is the National Health Service.

Today we voice our gratitude for those who serve this country in the National Health Service and pray for that God would prosper the work of their hands – that they would all be encouraged in their continued work of sacrifice and care amongst us.

Friday – for national and local government.

We pray for those who are in positions of authority with responsibility for decision making at national and local level at this difficult time.

We ask that God would give great wisdom, deep commitment to all and right judgment.

Saturday - all who are grieving, and all those suffering with physical and mental health.

We bring to God all those who suffer in body, mind, spirit or with grief.

We ask that in God's great loving kindness they might know God's sustaining presence amidst their pain.

We pray for those who are stretched beyond their own capacity to cope and remain hopeful – that in the roar of these waterfalls God would bring a sense of coherence, comfort and strength.



**Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
All things are passing away: God never changes.
Patience obtains all things.
Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices.**

— St Teresa of Avila —

**O Blessed Jesus,
give me stillness of soul in you.
Let your mighty calmness reign in me.
Rule me, O King of Gentleness,
King of Peace.**

— St. John of the Cross —

