

1st Sunday in Lent – He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (Mark1:13)

Lent is a season that is inspired and informed by the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness at the outset of his earthly ministry. Seeking to determine his purpose and vocation, he was tempted to pursue pathways that did not belong to the way of God's Kingdom.

Yet in those temptations there is more than an echo of the kind of religion that we can all too easily find ourselves pursuing. Lent is a time for us also to free ourselves of such inclinations, and be reminded again of their emphatic rejection.

(If used in public worship, this reading might work best if two voices read alternate stanzas)

Turn these stones into bread
Grant us a faith where self is satisfied
And tables are spread at which believers can dine
With backs turned on a needy, hungry world

But bread alone will not sustain
And the food of your word calls us to place others before ourselves;
To seek your Kingdom and speak your truth,
Casting its light upon pathways of hope.

Leap from the temple's highest tower
Grant us a faith that thrills and entertains
Where we can applaud and cheer for more
To take our minds off the crosses that others may bear.

But you refuse the temptation of being shaped by our desires
To willingly dance to tunes of our making.
You call us to capture this world's attention
With refrains of justice and acts of compassion.

Sign up to the agendas of the powers that be
Grant us a faith that leaves their gods and idols unchallenged and undisturbed;
That asks no questions of systems and structures
That leave many behind, oppressed and forgotten

But you are the one we are called to enthrone
Whose kingdom is founded on justice and right
That nations might rejoice in the light of its coming
And hope can echo when its cause is embraced.

2nd Sunday in Lent - 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. (Mark 8:34)

The call to deny ourselves is not only counter-cultural but counter-intuitive. Our recognition of human rights and dignity motivates and informs our commitment to social justice. How, in the light of this are we to understand Christ's call to self-denial? Are we merely invited to passively accept those injustices that deny and undermine human dignity? Is the cross simply a symbol of quiet submission?

As we pause to explore the person that God has made us to be, we might also recognise the identities and personas that this world can place upon us. These are identities that define borders, create barriers, measure worth, include some and leave others outside.

As we learn to leave these "selves" behind, so we discover more of our common humanity with those that some would define as "other". And so we become dissatisfied with a world that excludes and discriminates, that fabricates labels like "migrant" and "stranger"; where the needy are left without refuge when they fail to fit the moulds of acceptability and worth.

Who am I?

What is this self that you call me to deny?

Who are you calling us to become

Amidst a world of identities and boundaries, personalities and status?

In the self we leave behind,

Lie the trappings of a world that would press us into its mould;

Imposing its narratives of difference and discrimination;

Protecting interests that we have learned not to question.

But as we journey deeper

Into the person you have made us to be,

We discover in the face of each stranger,

The shared hopes and common accord of a fellow traveller.

For your call to discipleship extends beyond our human boundaries

Transcending the temporary divisions of this world

And through the common journey that you call us all to follow

Human need and dignity comes to matter more than borders.

In the solitude of the desert

The stranger seeking refuge becomes a potential companion

Their presence brings hope and the joy of shared humanity

In every encounter, lives are enriched and threats diminish

So help us learn the lessons of self-denial

And recognise that our places of plenty remain deserts for some

Barren, cold and unwelcoming wildernesses of rejection

Where beacons of hope can still be defiantly kindled.

3rd Sunday in Lent - 'Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!' [John 2:16]

Jesus enters the temple in the throes of religious festival and casts out the peddlers and merchants who have turned it into a commercial enterprise. Religion has become a way of earning an easy living – devotion has become an opportunity to inflate the prices of the necessary paraphernalia of ritual and tradition.

The Court of the Gentiles had become a religious market place. The outer court, that for many would be the only part of the temple into which they were admitted, had ceased to be their place of prayer. God had been displaced in the name of religion; exploitation and opportunism had been clothed with respectability and expedience.

Jesus' response is dramatic and decisive, in a matter of moments tables are upturned, wares are sent flying and the entire scene is thrown into disarray. As our Lentern journey continues, we are reminded that the road to Calvary is not a place for easy religion.

What are the sounds that herald God's coming?
Songs of praise and refrains of Hosanna?
Or the clattering of upturned tables, jangling of scattered coins
And the shouts and protests of angry traders?

For in the midst of this disrupted marketplace
You call all people to reclaim the rhythms of prayerfulness
Exposing the selfish opportunism
That is falsely veiled in expediency and necessity

Preserve us from a faith, where we become the temple traders
Laying out our stalls of religion and routine
Crowding out the gateways to your presence with our own pre-occupations
Leaving those who seek you outside of our cluttered sacred courts.

What public squares are we called to reclaim;
As places where your word can once again resound?
What tables are we called to over-turn;
That have too readily become the seats of exploitation?

What facades of respectability are we called to strip away?
What light might we shed on injustice?
Whose empires are we called to topple,
As the Redeemer's presence is again made known?

Help us become true Beacons of Hope;
Where the radiance of your presence burns undiminished;
Where thresholds of gracious welcome are clearly illumined;
And the light of truth exposes evil's harmful endeavours.

4th Sunday in Lent – “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world” [John 3:17]

Our journey through lent is an opportunity for fresh encounters with God; to enlarge and deepen our vision of our Creator. But as we look again at the people we are, in the light of God’s true nature, our own shortcomings become even more apparent.

Yet God does not leave us to wallow in a sense of unworthiness, but welcomes us with mercy and grace. His cross declares a measureless love, through which we find redemption and forgiveness.

This Gospel flies in the face of the cultures of blame that have become so commonplace in our world, where political capital can be gleaned through narratives of fear and suspicion. As those who have received grace, we are called to speak a different language, a language that makes grace known. Grace and mercy are powerful lenses in our Beacons of Hope.

As we are drawn more close to you,
Your purity and holiness infuses each encounter.
With lives laid bare in your presence,
The contrast of our shortcomings becomes ever more clear.

Yet despite our disappointments,
The failures and weaknesses of which we are all too aware,
Yours is a face of welcome; your outstretched hand
Reveals a grace beyond measure and human comprehension.

The crosses we carry reflect your own
Beckoning us to that place where love outpoured
Bore every injustice and the worst of our intent.
Crying out, even amidst its deepest pain, for a Father’s forgiveness.

But we cannot walk away unchanged;
For those to whom grace has been extended,
Can be its truest advocates amidst this unforgiving world.
Peacemakers; reconcilers; determined that evil shall not repay evil.

The language of grace will outrage and disturb
In a world that treats every stranger with suspicion
That seeks to lay blame and demand retribution;
That assumes the worst of those whose worth has yet to be proven.

We will not be consumed by these unholy narratives
Nor shore up regimes that build themselves on hate.
For guilt and shortcoming is humanity’s common scar
Grace and mercy their eternal conqueror.

5th Sunday in Lent – “for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” [Jeremiah 31:34]

Lent is a time for deepening our relationship with God; to explore more fully the nature and purposes of our God. The desert is a place of stark emptiness; devoid of the trappings and distractions of more familiar environments. Therein lies the challenge of whether our routines of worship, prayer and activity have themselves become such trappings. To what degree are our perceptions of God constrained by the language and priorities we choose, leaving us blind to other aspects of his being?

Jeremiah offered an invitation to a people who knew about God to re-discover their covenant relationship and know God for themselves.

You call us to be still – and in stillness know you more
In the empty wilderness, there is no figure but yours
No-one else on whom we can fix our attention,
Nothing with which to busy ourselves, except your waiting presence.

Throne rooms and palaces are easy to prefer;
Where the comforting distractions of frenzied activity,
And the noise and clamour of well-intentioned adoration,
Help us avoid the searing questions of your Kingdom’s cause

And on our very doorsteps are many desert places
Landscapes scarred by neglect and deprivation
Lives parched and wearied by emptiness and longing
Not as passing pilgrims but imprisoned by a climate that is cruel and unforgiving.

Dare we believe that if we stand in that desert
Allow ourselves to be buffeted and scorched by its harsh extremes
That there we might not only find you
But see you in new light and discover more of who you are

For the God who has become one with us
Chooses not to invite us to any palatial banquet
Until we have walked with him in desert places
Taking up our cross to follow in the pathways of self-denial.

So let our light shine in the places that others might avoid
Let beacons of hope be kindled in places of despair
May we not simply wait for desert dwellers to join our self-styled party
But seek in their stories, new glimpses of who you are.

6th Sunday in Lent – Palm Sunday “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” [John 12:13]

They lined the road, palm branches held high
Reciting familiar words from well-known Psalms
Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna in the Highest
Blessed in He, who comes in the name of the Lord

Word-perfect; well-rehearsed
True to every line of the script.
Playing their part in this human tableau
That acted out their deepest hopes and longings.

One day, maybe one day, it would all be for real
There would be a King; God’s King
A liberator; Saviour; Messiah
A true Son of David, enthroned again as King of the Jews.

But for now they must content themselves with the annual ritual
Acting out the past; hoping for a future
But living in the painful present.
Words and actions that said everything, yet meant nothing

And through the crowd came the man from Nazareth
Riding on a Donkey

And those with eyes to see could see
The king had finally come
God, present with his people
To be welcomed and proclaimed

And those with eyes to see could see
The usurper had finally gone too far
The rebel, present with his people
To be crushed and put down

And those with eyes that could not see
Waved and cheered the stranger into town
Then put down their palm leaves
Took up their cloaks
And went away
To learn their lines
For the next act in the drama
Crucify! Crucify!