

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
ZOOM: Service Sunday 21.02.21; Lent 1B

Introduction and Prayer

Good morning.

"We are not all gathered in the same building, but we worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship." (National Worship Team, edited)

Today we think about the Baptism of Jesus, about his testing in the desert, and the beginning of his ministry in Galilee.

A Prayer:

Bless the Lord, my soul, who leads me into life. The most important thing for me to do now, is for a moment, to let go of my own concerns, my own worries, fears and reluctance, and let myself be led by God, trusting that God, who loves me, will lead me into life.

Hymn 189 Be Still

Be still for the presence of the Lord
The Holy one is here
Come bow before him now
In reverence and fear
In Him no sin is found
We stand on Holy ground
Be still for the presence of the Lord
The Holy one is here.

Be still for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around
He burns with Holy fire
With splendor He is crowned

How awesome is the sight
Our radiant King of light
Be still for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around.

Be still for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place
He comes to cleanse and heal
To minister His grace
No work too hard for Him
In faith receive from Him
Be still for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place.

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

God of the seas, and the skies, God of the rainbow,
God the one, true God,
we give thanks for the light and colour you bring into our lives,
and for inspiring us with a desire to serve.

At all times, and especially in these uncertain times,
as the Covid pandemic casts doubt
over so many things that we have taken for granted,
we thank you for your reassuring presence,
for your promise and encouragement;
your guiding hand; your eternal love.

In this season of Lent,
we remember with regret times when we have questioned you,
turned away from you,
doubtful of your will for us;
stifling ourselves in the darkness of our own uncertainty,
and failing not only ourselves, but those whom we love.

Refresh us and renew us,
that we may overcome our weakness,
cast aside regrets and guilt and discouragement,
and walk in your ways once more.

We ask that you will not give up on us,
but take us by the hand, and put us back on course,
a course underpinned by your strength,
and your love, leading us into service, fulfilment and contentment.
Restore us to yourself, so that we may lift up our hearts and minds and voices,
to respond to the call of Christ;
to follow his example; to search our hearts,
and to commit ourselves more wholly to you.

As we progress through the journey of Lent,
may we listen for your voice,
that we may learn of you, know you better, and love you better.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who taught us when we pray to say:
*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, for ever. Amen.*

Readings: (Hugh):

1st Reading: Genesis 9:8-17: (NRSVA)

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.'

Hymn: Lead me Lord

Lead me Lord
Lead me in Thy righteousness
Make Thy way plain before my face (x2)

For it is Thou Lord, Thou Lord only
that makest me dwell in safety (x2)

Gospel Reading: Hugh

Mark 1: 9-15 (NRSVA) The Baptism of Jesus

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.'

The Temptation of Jesus

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.

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

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.'

Message:

Today is The First Sunday in Lent, the forty days leading up to Easter, in which Christians remember Jesus's withdrawal into the desert – the story Hugh read from Mark's gospel today.

Some traditions observe Lent by fasting; self-denial; giving something up, but Lent is more than that.

During Lent we prepare ourselves, through prayer, reflection, penitence, for Holy Week and the commemoration of the suffering and death of Jesus, culminating in the celebration of his resurrection at Easter. Many Christians think of this time as a journey with Jesus to Jerusalem and to the cross.

Today's short reading from Mark's Gospel covers a lot: Jesus's baptism; the Temptation in the Wilderness; the beginning of his Galilean ministry.

Jesus is baptised by John. The spirit descends, like a dove, and a voice from heaven declares 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Then, immediately, the Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness. He is there for forty days, tempted - tested - by Satan, with the wild beasts, and with the angels waiting upon him: a period of preparation and testing.

Then John the Baptist is arrested, and Jesus begins his ministry.

'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

In his baptism, Jesus voluntarily identified himself with the sinful people that he came to save:

"He was numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12).

The *Word Made Flesh* came among his people to live as they did.

The Baptism of Jesus reminds us of a relationship with God stretching back to God's covenant with Noah in our Genesis reading.

Many of us have been baptised. Words were spoken over us; undertakings made.

Those of us baptised as infants had an opportunity later to endorse these undertakings.

Lent is a time to think about, and renew, the commitments of our baptism.

Then, for Jesus, straight from the euphoria of his baptism, and the approval of God, to the time of testing.

In several places in the New Testament we find Jesus going out into the wilderness, that sparsely-populated area of semi-desert, where he could be alone.

Usually, he *chooses* to go, but here he is *driven out* by the Spirit - that same Spirit that came upon him at his baptism - to be tested. The Greek word used here means to test, or try out. Not temptation intended to make him fall, but to prepare him for what lay ahead.

Of course we can't know what Jesus faced out there on his own.

We don't talk much about Satan nowadays. Our world is a long way from the world of Jesus's time, when people saw demons and devils behind every misfortune, every illness; lurking, ready to harm them in countless ways.

Yet, I think we *do* recognise the picture.

I suspect that, at one time or another, we have all been driven by the Spirit out into the wilderness.

We have all visited the Wilderness of grief;

the Wilderness of worry: of disappointment; disillusionment.

The Wilderness of Inadequacy and insecurity.

The Wilderness of Missed Opportunity - missed opportunities for a kind word or a good deed; opportunity to right a wrong - opportunity to say sorry.

The wilderness of unhappiness, or guilt.

There's the Wilderness of the breakup of human relationships.

The wilderness of things gone wrong in our own affairs, or the affairs of those we love - often that's the hardest to manage. It's very difficult to stand by, unable to do anything constructive to help, and watch things going wrong for other people.

There's the wilderness of isolation from God. Yet, as the Psalmist reminds us, there is nowhere that we are separated from God:

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. (Ps. 139:8).

Driven into the wilderness by the Spirit? Yes, by the Spirit of conscience.

In that wilderness we confront our own demons.

The Demons of regret and guilt.

The Demon of the Unguarded Moment

that opens the way for our darker side to take over.

The Demon of the Hasty Word, spoken in impatience or anger,

that we wish we could take back,

The Demon of Envy and Comparisons that reminds you

that you're not doing as well in your career as Bill,

that you're earning less than John, or that you don't have as nice a house as Mary.

The Demon that makes us forget that, compared with millions of people throughout the world, we are well off indeed.

This Wilderness is not a good place to be.

Jesus knows that. *He went there before us.*

On the other hand, two weeks ago, we thought about how Jesus often *sought out* lonely places, wilderness places, to pray. He needed to recharge his spiritual batteries.

So do we. We need our quiet times, even our wilderness times. We need our 'thin places'. It is in these times and in these places that we come closest to God.

Lent is a time to put our lives back into order:
to review and repair our relationship with God, and our relationships with other people.
We all need to spend some time in quietness, away from distractions.
Maybe we can't go out into the desert, but we can certainly go into a deeper level of ourselves.

We need not be frightened by what we may find there, for Jesus has been there before us, and though he was tempted by Satan, *'the angels came and took care of him'*.

In our wilderness, in our 'thin places', we will meet with angels too.
Not people with wings and halos and harps. We will meet with the Angel of Sympathy; the Angel of Encouragement; the Angels of Forgiveness and Renewal.

This Lent, let us go again to our thin places, and, if need be, confront our devils, knowing that Jesus Christ has gone before us.

Let us meet with the angels too, and let them help us.

Maybe we will even learn to be angels in somebody else's wilderness. Amen. SDG.

Hymn 458 At the name of Jesus

At the name of Jesus
Every knee shall bow
Every tongue confess Him
King of glory now
Tis the Father's pleasure
We should call Him Lord
Who from the beginning
was the mighty Word

In your hearts enthrone him
there let him subdue
all that is not holy
all that is not true
Let his grace support you
in temptation's hour
and his will enfold you
in its light and power

Brothers, sisters name Him
With love strong as death
but with awe and wonder
and with bated breath
He is God the Saviour
He is Christ the Lord
ever to be worshipped
trusted and adored

In his Father's glory
Christ shall come again
angel hosts proclaiming
his return to reign
For all wreaths of empire
Meet upon his brow
and our hearts confess him
King of glory now

Prayer for Others and Blessing

As we bring to God our prayers for other people,
we give thanks for his never-ending faithfulness,
his constant love, his inexhaustible care.

We give thanks that he chooses and calls ordinary people
to step out of their comfort zones to serve him through serving others.

We give thanks that we have been entrusted with the care of God's people,
here, in this place and this time.

On this first Sunday of Lent we pray for all those still wandering,
still seeking, still unsure of who they are; still unsure of God.

We pray for those who feel that life is but a desert, full of worry and despair:
may they discover a fresh shoot of hope emerging.
We pray for lives that seem arid and useless, that hope will filter through.
Where hopes and dreams have been blown away, as by a desert storm,
may new beginnings be planted, and new life harvested.

We pray for those who struggle on from day to day, fearful of the future,
that they may know the reassuring presence of God, and the depths of his love.

We pray for all people in any way affected by the Pandemic:
for those for whom Covid restrictions increase the ordinary demands of family life,
and bring friction and division;
for all who are too busy, too stressed, too tired, or too discouraged to turn to God,
that they may know his peace.

We pray for all who have lost jobs and sources of income,
and for those for whom Covid-19 comes on top of poverty and deprivation,
adds another disaster to disasters brought by storm, flood, earthquake or fire,
or brings additional terror to lives devastated by war,
or under constant threat of injustice and oppression.

We pray that God may be close to all who have lost a loved one to Covid,
or for any other reason, even if they feel themselves very far from God.
May God support all those who are ill or anxious, or in trouble of any kind.
At this time we think of all those for whom we have special concerns today.

Pause

Gracious God,
conscious of our continuing need of you, we come to you in hope, and in confidence.
Renew us, we pray, and inspire us again with a desire to rediscover you in all the business of
our lives, that we may fulfil our calling as followers of Jesus Christ
in this place and in this world.
In his name we ask.

As you are made in the image of God, may his peace be in you, his love enfold you,
his word direct you, his joy uphold you, his strength protect you,
today and in all the days ahead.
And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you, and remain with you, now and always. Amen.