

starters for Sunday

First Sunday in Lent

22 February 2015

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Prof Kenneth R Ross, Minister of Craignish linked with Kilbrandon and Kilchattan linked with Kilninver and Kilmelford (Netherlorn), for his thoughts on the first Sunday in Lent.

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Quick Guide...

Helping people prepare for reading the Bible in worship can make a real difference. Overcoming nerves, reading in ways suitable to the text, speaking clearly etc.

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)

[Genesis 9: 8-17](#)

Living, as we do, in an age of floods, the story of Noah carries fresh resonance. Were the biblical message one which took no account of the natural environment there would be a big question as to whether it could speak to a situation where the integrity of the earth itself is at stake. Highly significant, therefore, is the fact that the covenant made by God is not only with Noah, his family and descendants but also “with every living creature”. The entire creation is embraced and upheld in the promise of God that never again shall the earth be destroyed by a flood.

The idea of covenant introduced in this passage is one which shapes the biblical text from beginning to end. It arises entirely from God’s initiative. Noah and the world as a whole are simply on the receiving end of the amazing grace of God. It is unconditional, comprehensive and also permanent or everlasting. It is concerned with the ultimate realities that define our life and our world.

There is a promise - never again will all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood. And there is a sign – the rainbow set in the clouds that bears witness to the promise. It is a vivid sign, one which grips the imagination. It is when sun and rain, mercy and judgement, come together that we see the rainbow. Against the gloom of the cloud stands the glory of the rainbow, assuring us of the grace of God even when we are amidst the storm.

[Psalm 25: 1-10](#)

This is an acrostic or alphabetic psalm, with each single verse beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It is a prayer for God’s guidance, driven by the conviction that there is a disposition and approach to life in which we discover the ways of the Lord. Divine guidance is not a matter of omens appearing out of the blue. Rather it is a matter of having a heart for God and a way of life in which we discover the character of God and what it means for our conduct in



any given situation. It finds echoes in the New Testament with its use of “walk” as a metaphor for Christian living and of “the Way” as a term for Christianity itself.

The psalm begins with an expression of confidence in God and a plea for vindication akin to the refrain in the Te Deum – “Let me never be confounded”. There follows an appeal for teaching, not so much for new information as for a taking to heart of what we know of the Lord – “teach me what I already know”. It is a prayer that evokes for us “the way, the truth and the life” which ultimately we find in the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is honesty and humility in acknowledging the issue of “the sins of my youth”. None of us bring an unblemished past when we come seeking the guidance of God. But past failures are met by the mercy and steadfast love of God. Receiving God’s forgiveness provides the foundation on which to build a new life. The steadfast love and faithfulness of God in which we find redemption provide also the keynotes for the life we are called to live. The more we build a character that reflects the qualities we find in God, the more we will discover sound guidance for the living of our lives.

[1 Peter 3: 18-22](#)

How to make sense of suffering is a perennial question. Evidently those to whom Peter wrote were all too familiar with the experience of suffering. This he sets in the context of the suffering of Christ. The death of Christ is something unique and unrepeatable yet also represents a pathway on which we are invited to walk. In verse 18 we have one of the most profound and succinct statements of the meaning and purpose of Christ’s death – “in order to bring you to God”.

The verb “bring” has resonance both for Jew and for Greek. In the Old Testament it is those who are to be priests who are “brought to God”; now this embraces all of us. In the Greek world, at the court of a king, there would be an official who was responsible to determine who would be brought before the king; now, through Jesus Christ, we all may enjoy access to God.

The scale and magnitude of the event of Christ’s death is reflected in his going to make a proclamation to “the spirits in prison”. Some commentators understand these to be supernatural beings to whom Christ proclaims his victory. More commonly, they are understood



as departed human spirits who occupy the “shadowlands” of Hades or Sheol. This interpretation has strong resonance in African communities where there is a strong sense of our being connected with the “living dead”, the ancestors whose life continues in a different mode. No doubt we are pushed beyond the limits of our finite understanding here. The point is that Christ’s death is an event which transcends space and time, universal in its reference – something underlined by the reference to the time of Noah.

The motif of water and the building of the ark bring us to baptism and what it means. The eight people saved by the ark prefigure the many now being saved through their baptism into Christ. Again the ultimate nature of Christ’s death and resurrection are emphasised. Through baptism we are made part of the salvation and renewal wrought by God through these decisive events and now anchored in the exaltation of Christ to the right hand of God.

[Mark 1: 9-15](#)

In terse but densely packed phrases Mark tells of how Jesus embarked on his public ministry. The way is prepared by his cousin John whose call to repentance and baptism signify that the time has come when God will execute a decisive judgment from which a new Israel will emerge. In his baptism Jesus identifies with his people and the judgment they face. His commitment is answered by God in the vision of the rending of the heavens, the descent of the Spirit and the testimony of the voice from heaven. A very local and time-specific event takes on universal and eternal significance.

This is underlined in an unexpected way when immediately after the affirmation which marked his baptism Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. The action of the Holy Spirit shows that we are concerned not only with human reality but also with divine initiative. The forty days of temptation recalls Moses’s stay on Mount Sinai and Elijah’s wandering through the wilderness to Mount Horeb. The adversity Jesus met in this concentrated period points to the confrontation which will mark his entire ministry and lead finally to its climax. Being with the wild beasts speaks of being far removed from the inhabited and cultivated land that the Bible associates with blessing. Despite the hostile environment, however, Jesus is sustained in his purpose by angels representing the presence of God.



When it comes to time, the Bible is concerned less with *chronos* – the passing of hours, days or years – and more with *kairos* – the moment of opportunity. Here we arrive at a point where the time is fulfilled – the moment has arrived for something decisive to happen. Picking up the note struck first by John the Baptist, Jesus introduces his message with this sense of urgency. What is arriving is nothing less than the reign of God – now present in Jesus to bring a radical challenge to human alienation and rebellion. The message brings an imperative – “repent and believe in the gospel”. How will we respond to this summons?

Sermon Ideas

“We can’t go on like this”. How often have we found ourselves saying that in recent times? When the economy was allowed to rest on unsustainable forms of debt we realised that “we can’t go on like this”. When our affluent lifestyle brings about climate change that threatens environmental catastrophe we have to face the fact that “we can’t go on like this”. When hostilities break out again in the Middle East and innocent civilians are slaughtered – “we can’t go on like this”. Perhaps too in our own personal and family lives we have become aware of unhealthy influences or poisonous patterns of behaviour and have realised – “we can’t go on like this”.

Such was the mood among many people at the time when Jesus began his public ministry. We know this because many had flocked to hear the preaching of John the Baptist out in the desert. John was calling for radical change – “repentance” – and he seems to have caught the public mood. Not only was he calling for a change of direction. He was doing something unprecedented in Jewish history. He was calling on people to confess their sins and be baptised. In the Jewish tradition, baptism was something for Gentiles, for those from outside the Jewish community who had been attracted to it and wanted to become part of it. For the chosen people themselves there was no question of needing to be baptised. Not, that is, until John the Baptist appeared on the scene. As a statement of the radical change for which he was calling he invited the Jewish people themselves to be baptised. And here’s the surprise: many of them were up for it.

These stirring events provided the signal for Jesus to step up to begin his public ministry. His first step was to go out to the desert, join the crowd and offer himself for baptism. This has



often been puzzling to people, as it was to John himself. Knowing what he did about Jesus, he protested that it should be the other way round – he should be the one to be baptised and Jesus would be the right person to do the baptising. Knowing what we do about Jesus, we might also want to protest – baptism is a sign of sins confessed and repentance begun. Why would Jesus, who never sinned and who had no need to repent, be a candidate for baptism?

Good question! The answer is that Jesus was not there for himself. He was there for us. He was not baptised for himself. He was baptised for us. This was the moment when he publicly took up the responsibility for which he had come. And when he did so there came the assurance that he was right in the line of God's intention. "This is my own dear Son with whom I am well pleased," said the Father, while the Spirit came down in the form of a dove. Then Jesus knew that he was in the right place doing the right thing at the right time. Now he was ready to go forward with the fulfilment of his mission. He now became a representative figure – everything that he did would have implications for us.

Our modern culture has made us wary of the supernatural so we can easily be at a loss to comprehend such a drama. Yet we know that there is a spiritual dimension to life and here is the Spirit of God entering upon the human scene in a decisive way. We have been so inclined to privilege rational analysis – something that has stood us in good stead in many fields of enquiry. Yet have we impoverished ourselves by narrowing down the spiritual side of life? Faith can be strengthened by a robustly intellectual approach but perhaps we need the humility to recognise the limits of our intellect and to open ourselves to the breath of the Spirit of God.

Clearly this is what Jesus did in his life. Immediately after the high point of his baptism, the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness. This set the scene for the drama of God's particular purposes to unfold. Like Moses and Elijah before him Jesus opens himself to the challenges of a wilderness experience. For him this is the shape of things to come and he embraces his destiny. Deep spiritual experience undergirds his appearance in Galilee and his proclamation that the time has been fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near.

When the Bible refers to time it is not only the passing of minutes and hours and days that is in view. It is also the ripening of the purpose of God which comes to fruition at a certain point. Jesus was deeply conscious of arriving at such a moment, a time when the reign of God would



break into human life in an unprecedented and definitive way. Only by following the journey of Easter, Jesus' journey towards death and resurrection, can we discover what this is all about.

To do this will require a very broad canvas. The story in which we are invited to have a part is not one that is narrow or sectional in its scope. It embraces the whole of creation and spans every generation. Years ago J B Phillips challenged us with the title of his book – “Your God is too small”. More recently the new mission affirmation of the World Council of Churches, *Together Towards Life*, has encouraged us to think big when we consider the meaning of our Christian discipleship.

Rather than thinking of this simply in terms of humanity it encourages us to contemplate what it means for the entire creation. In our context today this is far from comfortable: “Consumerism triggers not limitless growth but rather endless exploitation of the earth's resources. Human greed is contributing to global warming and other forms of climate change. If this trend continues and earth is fatally damaged, what can we imagine salvation to be? Humanity cannot be saved alone while the rest of the created world perishes. Eco-justice cannot be separated from salvation, and salvation cannot come without a new humility that respects the needs of all life on earth.” (*Together Towards Life*, Geneva: WCC, 2013, pp. 10-11.)

Rather than thinking simply in terms of our personal or domestic life it encourages us to contemplate what our faith means in every dimension of life: “Mission spirituality is always transformative. Mission spirituality resists and seeks to transform all life-destroying values and systems wherever these are at work in our economies, our politics and even our churches... Mission spirituality motivates us to serve God's economy of life, not mammon, to share life at God's table rather than satisfy individual greed, to pursue change toward a better world while challenging the self-interest of the powerful who desire to maintain the status quo”. (*Together Towards Life*, Geneva: WCC, 2013, p. 13.) A Lenten journey is a matter of transformation, not only at the individual level but in every dimension of life.

Vast and comprehensive is the frame of reference we need to fully grasp the meaning of Lent and Easter. Yet in God's way of working an infinite scale of operation does not mean that small details don't matter. On the contrary, we need the microscope as well as the telescope to trace



the marvel of the ways of God. Even the small details that make up our own lives are embraced in this call for transformation.

The Spirit of God who prompted Jesus as he began his public ministry is present today to prompt us in our life's journey. It is time for us to be alert to the inner spiritual dimension of life. The Lenten season has proved its value as a time when we can deliberately attend to the inward dimension of our life – just as Jesus did during his forty days in the desert.

When he emerged from that time of testing he was aware not only that he was embarking on a new stage of his own life but that this new beginning would have implications for many others also. His message called for a response – “repent and believe in the good news” (Mark 1: 15). Here is a summons that echoes down across all the years. When we catch even a glimpse of what Jesus is about we realise that life is never going to be the same again. It is time for everything to be re-aligned so as to form a true response to what meets us in Jesus Christ.

One way or another we need to find our own experience of “wilderness”. We need the time and the space that allow us to focus without distraction on the purpose of God for our lives. Most of the time, let's be honest, our attention is absorbed by myriad other things. One reason people have valued the season of Lent is that it is a time of year which invites us to spiritual discipline, to reconsidering priorities, to getting our attention clearly focused on God and on God's purpose for our life.

It is a time to identify the points where we need to say “we can't go on like this” and discover the life-giving paths that God is calling us to walk instead. However we do it, what matters is that we find in our lives the time and the place to do what Jesus was doing during his forty days and forty nights in the desert – being tested and so attaining clarity about the purpose and direction of his life.

Nothing is too big and nothing is too small to be taken into account in this process. It is time to say to God, as David did, “Make me to know your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me that you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.” (Psalm 25:4-5)



Time with Children

(1) All Creatures Great and Small

What a wonderful world God has given us! Sometimes we can get a sense of the majesty of our world when we look at very big things. What big things have a wow factor for you? (People may mention mountains, the wide ocean, the night sky, elephants, giraffes, bears etc.)

Yes, there are big things in God's world that take our breath away. But just as wonderful are the very small things we can notice when we pay attention. Are there any very small things that have a wow factor for you? (People may mention babies, puppies, seeds, flowers such as snowdrops, insects, tadpoles etc.)

To appreciate God's world we need to be alert to both the very big and the very small. We need both a telescope and a microscope. What does a telescope do? (With a telescope we can see the wonder of stars that are very big and very far away.) What does a microscope do? (With a microscope we can see the intricate details of the tiniest organisms.)

The season of Lent is a time to look closely at things, both the very big and the very small. We need the telescope to look at God's world in all its vastness. And we need the microscope to look at the small details of our own lives. So that we can understand everything in the light of who Jesus is and what it means to follow him.

(2) Testing Times

(Props: stones, tower of building blocks, mound to represent a mountain.)

At his baptism Jesus had been called the Son of God. Now he had to spend forty days being tested in the wilderness to discover what this would mean. We all have to face testing times in life so we can learn from the way Jesus faced his.

The stones

How do we behave when we have to give up being comfortable? Think of the conditions contestants face on "reality TV" programmes when they have to survive with less food and luxuries than normal. Often they complain about it or try to cheat. In the wilderness Jesus was deprived of even the basics of life (food, shelter, water) but when tempted to "cheat" he refused to give in. He could have turned the stones into bread but he chose instead to rely on God to provide for him.



The tall tower

What might we do if we had amazing, miraculous powers? Would we be tempted to show off, to impress everyone, to make ourselves look good? Jesus was tempted to jump off a very high tower to show off how God would protect him and save him from being hurt. “Definitely not,” he said, “there is no need to test the love and protection of God which is always there for us”.

The mountain

When things are tough, do we try to find an easy way out? There is nothing wrong with that, unless the easy way means doing something that would sadden God. When Jesus was taken to a very high mountain and he could see a very long way, he was told that everything he could see would be his if only he would give his loyalty to the devil. This would have been an easy way to win over all the people of the world, but he refused because it meant worshipping something other than God.

Jesus was tested during his time in the wilderness. He made his choice to do things God’s way. We can do the same when we are tested. The season of Lent is an opportunity to prepare ourselves for times of testing.

(Celebrations Sorted, Milton Keynes: Scripture Union, 2006, p. 18 – adapted.)

Prayers

Collect

Almighty God,
 your Son Jesus Christ
 fasted forty days in the wilderness,
 and was tempted as we are but did not 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 our Lord.



Scripture Sentence

“Because Jesus himself has passed through the test of suffering, he is able to help those who are in the midst of their test.” (Hebrews 2:18)

Prayer of Approach and Confession

Holy and everlasting God,
we worship you as we come together this day.

For you are worthy of the love and praise and adoration of our hearts.

Though we know only a little of who you are,
that little is enough to fill our minds with wonder,
our hearts with love,
and our wills with a determination to serve you.

We praise you that we are not in the dark about who you are,
for you have graciously revealed yourself to us –
in the marvel of the natural world around us,
in the unfolding of our history and, above all,
by coming yourself into our world in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We thank you for the great purpose for which he came –
the purpose of putting right all that has gone wrong in our human life.

And we thank you that,
when the time came for him to fulfil this purpose,
he stepped up and declared himself ready.

We thank you that he resisted every temptation to take an easier path.

We thank you that he held true to the path
of costly sacrifice which led to the suffering and death
that means, for us, redemption.



How can we ever thank you enough for the gift of Jesus?
When we consider the costliness of your love,
we realise how faint and feeble is the love which we offer to you.

Yet here we are.

We have drawn apart from our everyday concerns
to concentrate in this hour on the things that matter most.

We have come together to share this time
and this space where we may hear more
of who you are and of what you purpose for us;
where we may check out our priorities;
where we may bring our lives into alignment
with all that you have revealed to us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We admit that there is much in our lives
that falls short of what we would like to be,
and of what you call us to be.

Truly we have sinned in thought and word and action –
so we now confess our sins to you in the confidence
that our Lord Jesus Christ has died for those sins;
and that with him there is the new beginning
from where we may live true to your purposes.

May that newness fall upon our lives today
and equip us to live out the life of Christ in our time.

We join together in the prayer that he has taught us:

Lord's Prayer



Intercessory Prayers

We join today with the church worldwide
preparing to enter the season of Lent.

In every context we pray that,
following our Lord Jesus Christ,
your people would discover the faith,
the courage and the love they need to be true to him.

We remember especially sisters and brothers
who face challenging circumstances –
persecution or conflict or poverty.

Grant that as they take up their cross
to follow Christ they may know the joy of resurrection.

We pray for lands beset with crisis and turmoil at this time.

We pray that their peoples may be delivered
from strife and fear and
led on to paths of justice and peace and hope.

We pray too for our own land.

Guide, we pray, all who,
in their different vocations,
strive to create a future
which is just and prosperous and caring.

Especially we pray for all entrusted
with leadership responsibilities in these challenging days.

We pray for our own community,
remembering especially those who
face times of sorrow or trouble or anxiety at this time.



We pray for our congregation
witnessing to Christ in our time and place.

Grant that our weekly worship
would be inspiring and uplifting;
and that our members
would be salt and light within the community.

Bless our homes,
that love and joy may dwell there;
and keep those loved ones
who are absent from us
within the protection of your love.

As the days lengthen
and earth spends longer in the light of day,
grant that we may spend longer in the light of your presence.

May the seeds of your Word,
buried deep within us,
grow into love for you and love for people.

Grant that this season of Lent
may prove to be a springtime for our life in Christ.

These our prayers we bring in the name of Jesus Christ, our living Saviour. Amen

Prayer from the Church of Bangladesh

O Lord of grace,
lead us and guide us
from a life of self-centredness
and satisfaction for what we are and
what we do to a life of dependence on you.



Inspire our hearts that we rise
beyond the daily trifles of our existence and
join with you in love and
concern for the whole creation,
that we may always remind ourselves
that we are the disciples of one
who did not help himself but was a man for others.

Grant that we may,
through our life and example,
work for a world where God is praised and
we all live like salt and
leaven in the midst of this mass of humanity and
in a bond of charity.

O God the Holy Spirit,
inspire, hallow and guide us
in this vocation of wholeness and healing,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

(The SPCK Book of Christian Prayer, London: SPCK, 1995, p. 383.)

Come Holy Spirit

Come Holy Spirit
transform with newness
the world that you love
that all creation may
rejoice in freedom with you.

Come Holy Spirit
inspire us to see you
in the places that hide you



and summon us to
witness at your side.

Come Holy Spirit
convert us from death to life
subvert our ways of living
trading, being
that hurt and harm the earth.

Come Holy Spirit
enthuse and renew us
fill us with song
so turning from loss,
we join your dance of life.

Go Holy Spirit
lead and leave us again
push us on our way
send us to our neighbours
and Creation's future day.

(Together Towards Life, Geneva: WCC, 2013, pp. 49-50.)



Musical Suggestions

CH4 31	I waited patiently for God
CH4 482	Come, let us to the Lord our God
CH4 174	God of great and God of small (children)
CH4 142	A small thing like a hazelnut (children)
CH4 334	On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
CH4 337	Forty days and forty nights
CH4 354	O Love, how deep, how broad, how high
CH4 402	Take up your cross, the Saviour said
CH4 495	Spirit of God, descend upon my heart
CH4 506	All I once held dear, built my life upon



Resources

Stephen Cherry, *Barefoot Disciple: Walking the Way of Passionate Humility*, London: Continuum, 2011.

Paula Gooder, *A Way through the Wilderness: Experiencing God's Help in Times of Crisis*, London: Church House Publishing, 2009.

I Desire Justice: Daily Reflections from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day, (from Ridley Hall, Cambridge) Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005.

Jooseop Keum ed., *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013.

David D. Ogston, *Scots Worship: Lent, Holy Week and Easter*, ed. Johnston McKay, Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2013.



Additional Resources

Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [Revealing Love](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#).



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music pages [Different Voices](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Prof Kenneth R Ross for providing us with this Sunday's material.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

