

## **The Fourth Sunday of Lent – a liturgy for worship at home**

### **Introduction**

In the Gospel today, we have that wonderful verse that sums up the whole New Testament, beginning ‘for God so loved the world.’ If we really accept that statement, how could we not put our trust in him? God does not force us, he just invites us to accept his love, and he invites us to share his love by our love for others. We think also today about how something of the love of God comes to us through a loving family and particularly through our mothers, whether those who gave us birth or those who have taken on the role of mother in our lives. Living on earth or departed we give special thanks for them on this Mothering Sunday, and pray for all today who share the gift and responsibility of motherhood.

### **Act of Penitence**

Let us begin by asking forgiveness from the Lord for the times we have refused or remained indifferent to his love, and the times we have failed to communicate his love to others.

Lord Jesus, your Father loves us with so much love that he gave you to us. Help us to respond daily to such generous love.  
Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, your Father sent you not to condemn us but to bring his love and salvation to us and to all people. Help us to live as restored people:  
Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you want us to bring to others the great love with which you love us. Give us grace to be generous, inclusive, and selfless in our mission:  
Lord, have mercy.

God, we rely on your love to forgive us all our sins. Renew us in your love that we may live the risen life of your Son here and now, and finally reach its eternal fullness. Amen.

### **Act of Praise**

*The Gloria is omitted during Lent. You may like to say or sing a suitable hymn. The following is particularly appropriate for Mothering Sunday as well as today’s Lenten theme:*

*For the beauty of the earth,  
For the beauty of the skies,  
For the love which from our birth  
Over and around us lies:  
Lord of all, to thee we raise  
This our sacrifice of praise.*

*For the beauty of each hour  
Of the day and of the night,  
Hill and vale and tree and flower,  
Sun and moon and stars of light:  
Lord of all....*

*For the joy of human love,  
Brother, sister, parent, child,  
Friends on earth, and friends above,  
Pleasures pure and undefiled:  
Lord of all.....*

*For each perfect gift of thine,  
To our race so freely given,  
Graces human and divine,  
Flowers of earth and buds of heaven.  
Lord of all.....*

*For thy Church which evermore  
Lifteth holy hands above,  
Offering up on every shore  
Her pure sacrifice of love:  
Lord of all.....*

### **Collect of the Day**

Merciful Lord, you know our struggle to serve you: when sin spoils our lives and overshadows our hearts, come to our aid and turn us back to you again, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Today's readings

*A reading from the book of Numbers*

(21: 4 – 9)

The Israelites left Mount Hor by the road to the Sea of Suph (*or Red Sea*), to skirt around Edom. On the way the people lost patience. They spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? For there is neither food nor water here; we are sick of this wretched food.'

At this, God sent fiery serpents among the people; their bite brought death to many in Israel. The people came and said to Moses, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Intercede for us with the Lord to save us from these serpents.'

So Moses interceded for the people, and the Lord replied, 'Make a fiery serpent and raise it as a standard. Anyone who is bitten and looks at it will survive.' So Moses made a serpent out of bronze and raised it as a standard, and anyone who was bitten by a serpent and looked at the bronze serpent survived.

*For the word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.*

*Psalm 107: 1 – 3 & 17 – 22*

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is gracious, for his steadfast love endures for ever.

Let the redeemed of the Lord say this, those he redeemed from the hand of the enemy,

And gathered out of the lands from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

Some were foolish and took a rebellious way and were plagued because of their wrongdoing.

Their soul abhorred all manner of food and drew near to the gates of death.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.

He sent forth his word and healed them and saved them from destruction.

Let them give thanks to the Lord for his goodness and the wonders he does for his children.

Let them offer him sacrifices of thanksgiving and tell of his acts with shouts of joy.

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.*

*A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Ephesians* (2: 1 – 10)

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

*For the word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.*

*Acclamation to greet the Gospel:*

Praise to you, O Christ, king of eternal glory!  
God loved the world so much that he gave his only son;  
Everyone who believes in him has eternal life.  
Praise to you, O Christ, king of eternal glory!

*Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John (3: 14 – 21)*

*Glory to you, O Lord.*

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

*The Gospel of the Lord: Praise to you, O Christ.*

### **Homily**

The image of light and darkness is a favourite and appropriate one for describing the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, and for Christians, life without Christ as opposed to life with him. Today, we hear again from the Gospel of John, the Gospel that loves to associate Jesus Christ with light that has come to shine in a world of darkness. Right at the beginning of his Gospel John writes these words about Jesus: ‘What has come into being in him was life, life that was the light of all people; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.’ Or perhaps the better translation: ‘the darkness did not understand it.’

In today’s reading we meet Nicodemus, a Pharisee who is presented to us as a representative of a religion that had lost its way. It was a religion that had been reduced to keeping lots of little rules and regulations, some of them all well and good, but many of them just pedantic and silly. The system and its leaders encouraged people to believe that they could get close to God by carefully following the rules, observing every little clause in the book, keeping to the letter of the law: and, as we considered last week, observing the

commandments by being careful not to break them but without necessarily using them to do good.

Jesus showed and taught that that this kind of religion was useless, unreal, a sham. The real way to God, said Jesus, was to be born all over again in the Spirit of God. This meant the process of turning one's life around, being changed, transformed, so that with God's Spirit in the heart people can truly become children of God and live the way God intends for them to live. All who are baptised and sincerely following Christ are, by definition, born again, born anew in the Spirit of God.

I stress that because when I was preaching on this Gospel some years ago in a former parish, I became aware of a couple in the congregation, visitors who were clearly paying attention to what I was saying, for which, I have to say I am always grateful. After the service they approached me with glowing faces and said, 'Oh it was so good to hear your sermon. We are both born again Christians!' I gave them what I hope were encouraging words, but also some appropriate advice about their terminology.

Those who describe themselves 'born again Christians' are certainly not a special category set apart from or above other Christians. What they are usually trying to express by that tautological term is that until a certain point in life their faith, such as it was, was drab, monotonous, almost dead. Then one day or perhaps over a period of time, by the grace of God, they were awakened, their hearts were warmed, as the Wesley brothers described the experience. Their faith was renewed, enlightened, became real. God, and the worship of God, was no longer simply for Sundays or times of convenience or need but was now centre stage in their lives. Such transformation in life is surely something God wants for us all, and what Jesus came to promote and demonstrate. He called it being born anew or in the Spirit, the condition for life in the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus, and those he represented, didn't understand anything like this. He was stuck in an old way of religious thought and practice, which is probably why the writer made the point earlier in the passage of saying that he came to Jesus *by night*. To Nicodemus and all who thought like him, it was always night. They lived in spiritual darkness; they were blind to the light of God which shone through Jesus in everything he said and did.

There is still so much darkness and blindness in the world, though nothing to do with physical night-time or visual impairment. When people live and work purely for their own gain, when they cause hurt to others, ignore or exclude them, when they have aggressive or prejudicial attitudes towards any particular person, group or race, then for them it is still night, their world is one of darkness. This is life lived in separation from God, a state we traditionally call sin.

Following Jesus Christ is about choosing a better way, indeed it is about choosing life rather than death. Jesus is God's light shining in a darkened world. He shows God's way of life for us, the best way, ultimately the happiest way, the way that urges human beings to live and promote such things as love, compassion, generosity, reconciliation, peace, justice. It is about a life that is truly connected to God and to neighbour, living the great commandment.

The Christian mystics (again, not a special class of Christians but generally a description of those who have learned to see spiritual realities on a vaster scale than most of us) talk of each human being as being born with the light of God in them, the divine spark, as they sometimes call it. Mothering Sunday is a perhaps a good time to appreciate how we follow our parents in looks and in so many other characteristics and values and be thankful for them. As children also of God who is divine Father and Mother to us, we are all likenesses of God, however vague and imperfect. As our second reading today puts it, it is through God's grace and nothing we have achieved ourselves that we come to holiness and the fullness of life in Christ. 'For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for the good works which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.'

As we reflect upon the divine way of life into which we have been baptized and called to follow, let us in our worship today and through this Lenten season of renewal, resolve to connect more deeply with the light of God that already burns within us, so that our lives glow with a light and warmth that rouses the interest, the curiosity of others. Then let us pray that they too, by the grace of God, may choose to follow the same light, and come to the new day, the new birth and life, that God has made for all his children, for this world and continuing in the world to come.

*A few moments of silent reflection are recommended.*

**The Profession of Faith**, either the following or one of the traditional creeds:

*We believe in God the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.*

*We believe in God the Son, who lives in our hearts through faith, and fills us with his love.*

*We believe in God the Holy Spirit, who strengthens us with power from on high.*

*We believe in one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Our God is rich in mercy and his love for us is immeasurable, and so we are able to come to Him always with our worries cares and concerns and he will answer.

Lord God, we pray for the Church worldwide and all its ministries. We thank you that you have sustained it through the centuries; may your love continue to show forth in our life together as we proclaim your life giving, Holy Word. We pray for and ask your blessing on our Bishops Robert and David and all who serve the church as priests and ministers. We lift to you John and all who serve you in our Parish of St. Francis.

**Lord, in your Mercy .....Hear our Prayer**

Lord God, we bring before you the governments and nations of the world. We pray for those who develop and govern matters of public policy. May they understand that all people are yours and deserve protection and honour; give them wisdom and a sense of justice as they work for the good of all. We pray too for those countries who are at war or do not abide by International Human Rights law, may their hearts be softened and turned to you. We give thanks for those who fight for justice with their uncompromising witness. Protect them and keep them safe.

**Lord, in your Mercy .....Hear our Prayer**

Lord God, we pray for all families and homes represented here today and give thanks for the love and nurturing we have received. We especially pray today for all mothers, giving thanks for our own mothers, and including those who fulfilled the role of mother when circumstances required it. For those who are separated from their families and homes by war, famine, catastrophe, discord or covid restrictions, under your gracious providence may they be quickly and safely be reunited.

**Lord, in your Mercy .....Hear our Prayer**

Lord God, we pray for all who are sick and unwell at this time; those who are awaiting operations and those for whom there is no earthly cure. Have mercy on them, comfort them in their hour of need and bring forth your healing according to your word. In the silence of our hearts we bring before you those we know who need your touch..... Remembering Margaret Rainton, Petrina Thompson and Carol Hart. We also pray for all working on the front line in medical service that they will be kept safe.

**Lord, in your Mercy .....Hear our Prayer**

Lord God, we give thanks who have run the straight race of faith in you. May they now go from this life and awake and arise in the light of Christ. May those who are left behind be given comfort and the assurance of eternal life to all who call upon your name.

**Lord, in your Mercy .....Hear our Prayer**

May our prayers be the stones of our temple of praise, to you, O Lord, and our work for you to build us evermore closer into the body of Christ your beloved Son.

**Merciful Father, accept these prayer for the sake of your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Thankful for the love God has shown us in Jesus, we now pray to the Father with all trust the prayer of Jesus our Lord:

**Our Father.....**

*You may wish to offer this or an alternative prayer of spiritual communion, and/or in silence just sit in the peace of the ever-present Lord for a while.*

In union, dear Father, with Christian people throughout the world and across the centuries gathered to make Eucharist, hearing your holy Word and receiving the Precious Body and Blood, I offer you praise and thanksgiving. Even though I am exiled from tasting the Bread of Heaven and drinking the Cup of Life, I pray that you will unite me with all the baptised and with your Son who gave his life for us. Come Lord Jesus, dwell in me and send your Holy Spirit that I may be filled with your presence. Amen.

**Concluding Prayer**

Loving God, as a mother feeds her children, you feed us in the sacrament with the food and drink of eternal life: help us who taste your goodness on earth to grow in grace within the household of faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

**Blessing**

God, who from the death of sin raised you to new life in Christ, keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be with you, and those you love and pray for, today and always. Amen.

Let us go in the peace and strength of the Lord, ready to share each other's burdens. Thanks be to God.