

The First Sunday of Lent – a liturgy for worship at home

Introduction

On this First Sunday of Lent we have just begun our journey of forty days to Easter. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness in fasting and prayer to prepare himself to be the kind of Messiah God wanted. In this holy season we too are given our forty days, to re-examine ourselves before God and ask ourselves whether we are or want to live lives that are truly God-centred. Let us look to Jesus here with us as we worship, to see if, with him, and by his power, we are willing to reject the temptations that try to divert us from the life that God wants for us.

Act of Penitence

The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart God will not despise. Let us come to the Lord, who is full of compassion, and acknowledge our transgressions in penitence and faith.

Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin:
Lord, have mercy.

Make me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me:
Christ, have mercy.

Cast me not away from your presence and take not your holy spirit from me:
Lord, have mercy.

God, give us the grace to repent, and be merciful to us. Continue your work of transformation in us and lead us to everlasting life. Amen.

Act of Praise

The Gloria is omitted during Lent. You may like to say or sing a suitable Lenten hymn, the following or some other:

*Now let us all with one accord,
In fellowship with ages past,
Keep vigil with our heavenly Lord,
In his temptation and his fast.*

*The covenant so long revealed
To faithful ones in former time,
Christ by his own example sealed; The Lord of love, in love sublime.*

*Remember, Lord, though frail we be,
By your own kind hand were we made;
And help us, lest our frailty
Cause you great name to be betrayed.*

*Hear us, O Trinity sublime,
And undivided unity;
So let this consecrated time
Bring forth its fruit abundantly.*

Collect of the Day

Heavenly Father, your Son battled with the powers of darkness, and grew closer to you in the desert: help us to use these days to grow in wisdom and prayer that we may witness to your saving love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today's readings

A reading from the book of Genesis

(9:8 - 17)

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."

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Psalm 25: 1 – 9

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; O my God, in you I trust; let me not be put to shame; let not my enemies triumph over me.

Let none who look to you be put to shame, but let the treacherous be shamed and frustrated.

Make me to know your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you have I hoped all the day long.

Remember, Lord, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting. Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions, but think on me in your goodness, O Lord, according to your steadfast love.

Gracious and upright is the Lord; therefore shall he teach sinners in the way. He will guide the humble in doing right, and teach his way to the lowly.

All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

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 first letter of St Peter (3:18 – 22)

Christ suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Acclamation to greet the Gospel:

Praise to you, O Christ, king of eternal glory!
The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.
Repent, and believe the good news.
Praise to you, O Christ, king of eternal glory!

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark (1:9-15)

Glory to you, O Lord.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised 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 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."

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

Homily

I can never read Mark's brief version of Jesus going off into the wilderness following his baptism, without one abiding memory. Long ago, although it seems like only yesterday, when I was at university reading theology, I used to attend a church where, one of my tutors, a delightfully articulate scholar by the name of Ieuan Pryce Ellis, was part of the ministry team. Fr Ellis, as we called him, was a Welshman. The distinctive tones of his homeland had long been expunged from his normal speech, no doubt as a result of his early years at an English public school, but he could recall them fluently and amusingly when imitating any of his Gallic contemporaries. I remember well that on the first Sunday of Lent one year he read today's Gospel passage in church. He looked at the congregation intently as he read the words, 'And immediately the Spirit *drove* Jesus into the wilderness.' He stressed the word 'drove,' said it very clearly and deliberately indicating that it had some special significance for us.

Well, that word does have significance, and a lot of it. It is unfortunate that Matthew and Luke, who, it is assumed had Mark's Gospel in front of them as they wrote up their own accounts, felt that the idea of Jesus, Son of God, actually being *driven* into the wilderness to be put to the test was too strong or inappropriate, and wrote in a more gentle way that Jesus was *led* by the Spirit. I suppose the Gospel writers writing in the last quarter of the first century, would often have found it difficult to express the humanity, and the sometimes vulnerability, of Jesus the man, the human being. After all, he was for them always Son of God, the risen Lord. But we have to remember that Jesus did not appear on earth as a ready-made package with the label 'God incarnate' written all over him as some of the early heretics thought. He had to learn and to make choices like the rest of us. As St Paul teaches us, when we consider the life and career of Jesus on earth, we are to look for his divine nature in his very humanity. God wanted to be that close to us. So Jesus had to be one of us completely, and come to understand his mission and purpose gradually as the Spirit guided him.

So here today we have Mark, the original Gospel writer, telling us that the Spirit of God actually drove Jesus out into the wilderness. It is surely the right word and it gives us a special insight. It is an appropriate word for us all as we begin another Lent, the season of the Spirit, the Spirit of truth who sets us free. For here is a spiritual truth that is frequently present for most of us when we are faced with the choice of staying where we are or as we are, or positively wrestling with possibilities and promptings that come to us, which if pursued will take us forward in the Christian life. And today's Gospel shows us that we are not alone. For even Jesus, free as he no doubt was from our inertia or reluctance, needed the full force of the Spirit of God to take him to the testing-ground of the wilderness where he would discover how God wanted him to present himself and his mission to the people of his world.

Perhaps the most appropriate prayer and resolution for ourselves at the beginning of Lent is the motto of the Benedictine monastic order, that we 'let go and let God:' that we let go of the resistance to the One who knows us better than we know our own selves, who loves us infinitely more than we can imagine, and who is more on our side than we are ourselves.

Dwelling on this thought of letting go and handing oneself over to the Spirit will bring us much closer to the experience of Jesus than such things as 'disciplines' or 'sacrifices' which so many of us are conditioned to think of as

our Lenten motivation. It should help us smile at our anxious efforts to bring our life under control, and the resolutions we make to give up this or take on that. This is not to discourage practices such as eating less, abstaining from certain things, some of which we could probably do without anyway, and of course, commendably giving more time to prayer and other spiritual resources. But let us see those things, those disciplines, as part of a bigger whole in a life and lifestyle that seeks to put God at the centre. For what we are most called to give up in Lent, with the hope and intention of giving it up permanently, is control itself, the control or need for security and certainty that can so dominate our lives, not just in everyday practical life but so often in the spiritual life too. Being followers of Jesus Christ should prompt us to seek and embrace the freedom that Jesus himself found in surrendering to the Spirit in his whole life, that is, by letting go, and letting God take charge.

The Spirit of God is the Spirit of truth. The Greek word that we translate as 'truth' literally means 'unhiddenness.' It is when the coverings of illusion are stripped away so that the real, the true, is able to emerge. The Lenten battle is not 'the Spirit versus the Flesh,' but rather the true self versus the false self. The true self, that is, who we are in God and what God has created and called us to be, emerges as we allow the Spirit of God a greater space than perhaps we do at present. The Spirit is able to break down the barriers, the resistances, the daily preoccupations, which so often prevent us from experiencing and enjoying a living contact with reality, the reality of the presence God. This does not require us to engage in special techniques or prayer practices. Just simple God awareness is enough, with regular time given to 'be still and know that I am God' as the psalmist responds to God's invitation.

During this Lent, may the Spirit lead us, or rather drive us, to the freedom that belongs to all who discover and enjoy their true and beloved identity, as the children of God.

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

When draw near to God, God will draw near us.

Let us pray to the God who has called us to be here today, bringing to him the cares of His church and the world.

We pray for a deeper faith among Christians and a readiness to respond to God's word, rediscover the ways of God and His calling. We pray for the strength and commitment to fight evil and cultivate good in our world.

Lord, hear usLord, Graciously hear us

We ask your blessing upon all clergy and lay ministers, especially our own Bishops Robert and David and our priest John. We pray that they will effectively proclaim the kingdom of God. We pray for our warden and church council, for our church charity shop and all who minister and help in St. Francis. May the church be a place of peace, comfort and hope for the future. We lift to you all those who would normally be worshipping with us but are not able to through sickness or virus restrictions.

Lord, hear usLord, Graciously hear us

Guide the leaders of the nations in the way of justice and peace; holding up to you Queen Elizabeth and King Felipe. We pray that peace will soon come to the war torn countries of the world; protect and guide those working to bring just resolutions. We pray that all those who hold positions of power will work unceasingly for the alleviation of hunger and misery in the world. Help us Lord to be mindful of the plenty we have may we always give to you the first fruits of our lives.

Lord, hear usLord, Graciously hear us

Lord, in our homes help us to listen to one another; teach us to be sensitive to the differing needs of our families. Bless each family represented here today and may each place their hope in the saving Word of God, Jesus Christ our Lord. We pray for those who are missing their families, the lonely or feeling neglected especially those who are unwell at home or in hospital.

We pray especially for Margaret Rainton, Petrina Thompson and Carol Hart that they will receive healing according to your word.

Lord, hear usLord, Graciously hear us

Be with those nearer the end of their earthly life, give them your strength comfort and peace in their hour of need.

We entrust to your loving care the recently departed, we bring before you all who mourn, we pray for families and friends left behind, give them comfort. We thank you for life, for memories and hope.

Lord, hear usLord, Graciously hear us

We thank you for your unending love for us, for your Holy Spirit joining us to you and for Jesus our Lord. May we dedicate ourselves to making these prayers a reality.

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

Lord Jesus, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

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.

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Concluding Prayer

Lord, you renew us with the living bread from heaven; by it you nourish our faith, increase our hope, and strengthen our love: teach us always to hunger for him who is the true and living bread, and enable us to live by every word that proceeds from out of your mouth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Blessing

Christ give you grace to grow in holiness, to deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow him; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be with you, and with those you love and pray for, today and always. Amen.

Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord. In the name of Christ. Amen.