

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 21 FEBRUARY 2021

This service was prepared for the Tuesday congregation at St Stephen's, and was subsequently used at Marsden Road Uniting Church (Carlingford). It recognises that Wednesday 17th was Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. At St Stephen's, we are using *It's all about hope* by Christopher J Monaghan CP, published by Garratt Publishing, Mulgrave, Victoria. One of the prayers is taken from that publication, and is used with permission and acknowledged accordingly.

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Eternal God, Lord of heaven and earth,
we praise you for your greatness.
Your wisdom is seen in all your works.
Your Word comes to us in the Scriptures;
your truth shines through the words
of countless generations
Your grace and truth are revealed
in Jesus your Son.
Your presence and power are given to us
through the Holy Spirit.
Holy One, we are not worthy to approach you,
but in your mercy, you reach out to us,
beckon us, welcome us, nurture us.
Therefore, blessed Trinity,
we worship and adore you for ever and ever.

Yet, Father, our lives do not reflect your mercy and love.
For we are sinners;
and no matter what our contrition,
no matter what resolutions we make,
we return, time and again, to our sinful ways.
Our world centres upon ourselves,
and only begrudgingly do we find space for others,
let alone for you, O God.
In our cacophony of busyness,
we block out the music of your grace.
We focus on the immediate and the selfish,
and miss altogether the vision you give us for a better world,
and a better way to live.
We come to you, our Father,
knowing that we have failed to obey the call of Jesus
to love you and one another with our whole being;
but we also come to you, Father, because you reach out to us
with healing and reconciliation.
Lord, have mercy on us.
In the name of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, we pray,
Amen

2 **Declaration of Forgiveness**

As the sick and afflicted came to Jesus,
crying, "Lord have mercy",
and they were healed;
so too we come to God,
crying "Lord have mercy",
and we are healed.
For Scripture assures us, if we confess our sins,
God is faithful and just, and will forgive us
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness
In the risen Lord Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven.
Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Readings –**

Genesis 9:8-17
Mark 1:9:15

4 **Sermon:** See below

5 **Prayers of the People and Lord's Prayer**

Loving God,
as we begin our Lenten journey
we pray that the mists that can cloud our vision may lift,
so that we may see the road that lies before us
and so come with open hearts to you, the source of living water.
Melt what is frozen within us,
warm our hearts,
and lift our spirits that we do not lose heart in our capacity to grow,
or in your desire to lead us safely home¹.
*Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.* (Psalm 25:4-5)

Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

¹ Prayer taken from 'It's All about Hope' by Chris Monaghan ©2020. Reproduced with permission from Garratt Publishing www.garrattpublishing.com.au.

5 Blessing and Dismissal

The blessing of the risen Christ,
the blessing of the loving and forgiving Father,
and the blessing of the strengthening and faithful Spirit,
be with you throughout this period of Lent,
and in all the days that follow.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Amen

SERMON

Tomorrow is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. Lent is a period of forty days (not including Sundays!) leading up to Easter, so it runs over about six and a half weeks. It's a time of preparation for Easter, when Christians in many traditions embrace practices such as fasting or disciplined prayer or Bible study, to deepen their understanding of the significance of the events which are to come. The choice of *forty* days is based on the story of the temptation of Jesus, which we read in Mark's very brief account today.

Indeed what Mark gives us is only two verses. If you were to turn to Matthew's or Luke's gospels, you'd find far fuller, and subtly different, accounts of this episode. Because we know the stories so well, it's tempting to conflate the three accounts into one omnibus version; but if we do that, we betray the artistry of the three individual authors. Today we'll limit ourselves just to Mark's very short account.

If we're going to understand what Mark is saying to us, there are a few details we need to get right. First, there's the wilderness. We do not need to think of wilderness as desert. For the Jews, wilderness was the areas outside human settlement. It was where nature ruled – remember that Mark has Jesus' presence there accompanied by “wild beasts”; and so the wilderness was the place where the orderliness and safety of cities and towns were altogether absent. It was a dangerous, untamed place.

You'll recall that Israel was said to have spent forty years in the wilderness of Sinai, where the Israelites faced all the dangers of isolation and deprivation, and all the temptations that arose from the fear and uncertainty, inherent in the untamed and dangerous places that lay between the Egyptian civilisation they had left, and the land of promise to which they were heading. It was only God who sustained them on that wilderness journey

So the way we should understand Mark's account of Jesus' temptation is that Jesus left the safety of the villages and towns of Judaea and Galilee, to face the dangers of an untamed and disorderly and frightening no man's land, and to do battle with the temptations that situation would inevitably throw at him.

Second, we do not need to take the period of “forty days” literally. In Hebrew literature, “forty days” stands for “a considerable time”. For example, Moses was said to have spent forty days on the mountaintop with God; the meal given to Elijah by the angel was said to have sustained him for forty days. It's the same when we read “forty years”. In Hebrew literature, “forty years” basically means a generation. So we shouldn't get too literal about Jesus' period of forty days either.

Then there's this “Satan” who appears to tempt Jesus. If you go back to the Old Testament, the concept of Satan evolves within the biblical literature. In Hebrew, the word *satan* simply means “adversary”. In the Old Testament, human adversaries are described as “satans”; and in Numbers (22:22), Balaam's way is blocked by someone called a satan, who is none other than the angel of the Lord. But in Job and the prophets, a satan is someone who pleads a case against you, listing all the things that could condemn you in a court of law, or in the court of God. And a satan of that meaning could still be an agent of God.

By the time the gospels were written, the word had evolved again, under the effect of Persian ideas, which the Jews had learned about during their captivity in Babylon. The Persians believed that the universe was the perpetual battleground between two more-or-less equal forces. One of them was the force of good, and the other was the force of evil. In Jewish thought, obviously the force for goodness became God. It wasn't too big a stretch to associate an adversary, to associate the one

who pleaded as strong a case against you as he could, with the cosmic opponent of goodness. So, for some Jews at least, “Satan” became personalised specifically as the cosmic opponent of God and the one who could bring about the downfall of God’s people.

Sadly, that development has led generations of Christians to believe in a diabolical figure called Satan, with a capital ‘S’. In turn that has led to terrible accusations against people who did not conform the accepted orthodoxy as being in league with Satan, or Satan’s agents, or worse. Christians with that belief will want to understand our passage from Mark as describing a personal contest between Jesus and this demon. It becomes a microcosm of that cosmic battle between good and evil. And it may well be that Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts do have that in mind. But it’s a far more open question whether or not Mark, which is the earliest gospel, actually means that. All Mark says is that Jesus was “tempted by Satan”. If you take away the capital ‘S’ – because ancient Greek did not have upper and lower case letters – the key thing that Mark is telling his readers is that Jesus faced the same temptations that all humans do. Just as the Israelites, during their wilderness experience, faced great temptations, so did Jesus during his time alone in the wilds. What Mark is doing is affirming the humanity of Jesus. Not only is Jesus truly God; Jesus is truly human too. Jesus, Mark is telling us, faced all the temptations which humans always have and always will.

There are two intriguing details in Mark’s telling of the temptation story that are all too easy to miss, especially if we confuse Mark’s account with Matthew’s and Luke’s. It’s only in Mark’s account, that the Spirit “drove” Jesus into the wilderness. In the other accounts, he was “led”. “Drove”, “led”: these are very different things. To be driven somewhere is to be forced there, even perhaps against your will. For Mark, no sooner had the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism, than that same Spirit “drove” him out into the wilderness to be tempted. It’s as if Jesus was now required to test his mettle, to face the difficulties and the agony and the pain of temptation. In the end, the only way to strengthen your spiritual muscle is to have to flex it. The only way to understand those who are tempted, and those who succumb to temptation and descend into sinfulness, is to have to battle with temptation yourself. So Jesus was *driven* into the wilderness by the same Spirit who had descended on him at the time of his baptism. This wilderness period, with all its perils, Mark is telling us, was *God’s* doing.

The second detail is Mark’s silence on Jesus’ fasting. It’s from Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts that we get the idea of Jesus fasting for these forty days. In fact, both of them specifically say that he ate nothing, and that one of the temptations that came his way was food, because he was “hungry”. Some translations understandably say “ravenous”. But Mark, which is the earliest telling of this story, says nothing of fasting or hunger. In fact he tells us that angels ministered to Jesus, or “waited on him”. In Mark’s account, there’s no reason to associate Jesus’ temptations with hunger. Does that matter? Perhaps I’m drawing too long a bow, but I think it does.

Last week, in our passage from II Corinthians, Paul gave a stern warning to the Christians in Corinth about “the god of this world.” We know, as Paul knew, that this world is full of false gods. Of course, in Paul’s day, there were countless pagan deities, but the real gods of this world were then pretty much what they are now – although they may have changed their costumes as the years have evolved. So much of humanity worships the gods that our world proffers as the most desirable and fulfilling things for human beings – wealth, power, success, possessions, security; sex and all the indulgences of the body, luxury and comfort.

As the people to whom Paul wrote; as we are in our own lives; Jesus would be tempted by all of these illusory “gods”. Jesus was fully human; he would feel the magnetism of all of the rewards this world can bestow. Mark’s account of the temptation is placed between Jesus’ baptism, and the commencement of his ministry, for a good reason. Jesus could not begin his ministry; he could not be authentic in his relationships or his teaching; until he had defeated, once and for all, the

temptations of this world.

It's surely those things which Matthew and Luke had in mind, when they fleshed out Mark's original account to include the temptations of wealth and power. But it's not some mythical "Satan" who tempts Jesus; it's the world – the same world that tempted his followers; the same world that induced Judas to betray Jesus for a purse full of coins; the same world that led some in the Corinthian church astray; the same world that holds out its alluring promises to us every single day.

When Jesus returned from his time in the wilderness, he had defeated all the world's temptations. His mettle had been tested and strengthened. He was ready to embark on his ministry. And so, Mark tells us, he began

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."

The work could now begin.

Is this not a wonderful passage with which to begin our own journey through Lent?

Whatever Lent is for each of us – whether fasting plays any part in it or not – we stand at the beginning of a time when we are called once again to identify and confront the gods of this world; to strengthen our spiritual muscle for the days that lie ahead; to join once again in the never-ending battle to stare down temptation. Unlike Jesus, we are not *driven* into our Lenten wilderness by God; we go voluntarily. Unlike Jesus, the very fate of humankind does not depend on *our* spiritual muscle. Because we *are* unlike Jesus; we know only too well that for each of our successes in facing down temptation, there will also be a time when we succumb to the "god of this world".

Thanks be to God, Lent is also then a reminder to us of the gospel. For all our effort and all our trying through these forty days, we know that we will never finally defeat the power of the gods of this world. And so, we will spend our forty days with our eyes raised to the horizon, where the cross of Calvary stands in all its tragedy and shame; but where, beyond the cross, we see the empty tomb of the risen Jesus. For throughout Lent, we are reminded of our own impotence against the power of sin, and of our utter dependence on the free gift of Jesus Christ, who alone was able to defeat the gods of this world and the stranglehold they had over us. The forty days of Lent proclaim to us this message: *Here is the good news of God. The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*

Amen