

1st March 2026 – Morning Service

Second Sunday in Lent

Martyn Filsak

Call to Worship: Psalm 121: 1-2

If I lift up my eyes to the hills where shall I find help? My help comes only from the Lord, who has made heaven and earth.

Our first hymn reflects the fact that we could not bring ourselves to salvation. Whereas the first Adam failed and brought sin into the world, the second Adam (Jesus) gained the victory and brought about God's rescue plan.

StF 334 – Praise to the Holiest

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| 1) Praise to the Holiest in the height,
And in the depth be praise;
In all his words most wonderful,
Most sure in all his ways. | 4) And that a higher gift than grace
Should flesh and blood refine,
God's presence and his very self,
And essence all-divine. |
| 2) O loving wisdom of our God!
When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came. | 5) O generous love! that he, who came
As man to smite the foe,
The double agony for us
As man should undergo; |
| 3) O wisest love! that flesh and blood,
Which did in Adam fail,
Should strive afresh against the foe,
Should strive and should prevail; | 6) And in the garden secretly,
And on the cross on high,
Should teach his followers, and inspire
To suffer and to die. |

John Henry Newman

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

God of heaven and earth, maker and sustainer of all things, we give you glory for your creation. The first hints of spring and the lengthening days remind us that we are in the season of Lent. As the daylight grows brighter and lasts longer, we look to the increasing light that will culminate in the revealing of salvation through Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit. We acknowledge your loving wisdom and grace that sent us the Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ. When humanity was helpless to save itself, you set in force a rescue plan that would reconcile people to you on the basis of faith. Lord God, Father, Son, Spirit, we worship you.

We confess our need of grace. We cannot save ourselves, nor wipe out our own sins. We needed a Saviour and you sent Jesus. We confess our ongoing need of grace daily. In many ways we continue to fall short and disappoint ourselves, yet you assure us of your continuing love. As we confess our shortcomings, we are aware of your assurance that our sins are forgiven and that nothing can take us away from your presence. We give you our thanks and praise. **Amen.**

Reading: Genesis 12: 1-4 (NIV)

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.

Reading: Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17 (NIV)

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

StF 362 – Meekness and majesty

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| 1) Meekness and majesty, manhood and deity,
In perfect harmony, the Man who is God.
Lord of eternity, dwells in humanity,
Kneels in humility and washes our feet. | 2) Father's pure radiance, perfect in innocence,
Yet learns obedience to death on a cross.
Suffering to give us life,
Conquering through sacrifice,
And as they crucify prays: `Father forgive'. |
| Ch) <i>O what a mystery,
Meekness and majesty.
Bow down and worship
For this is your God, this is your God.</i> | 3) Wisdom unsearchable, God the invisible,
Love indestructible in frailty appears.
Lord of infinity, stooping so tenderly,
Lifts our humanity to the heights of His throne. |

Graham Kendrick © 1986 Thankyou Music

Reading: John 3: 1-17 (NIV)

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at

my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Sermon

The gospel passage contains what is possibly the most famous and frequently-quoted verse in the Bible. John 3:16 is often heard at gospel rallies and cited in evangelistic literature, and rightly so as it's the good news in a nutshell: *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

Was this revolutionary to its hearer Nicodemus? He had approached Jesus by night, perhaps to keep his visit secret or perhaps in order to have a one-to-one audience with Jesus at a time when he would not be surrounded by crowds. We don't know whether Nicodemus came of his own initiative or whether he was sent by others in the Jewish Council of which he was a member. Either way, it seems that curiosity and seeking the truth is at the root of his visit. We do know from John chapter 19 that later in the gospel narrative Nicodemus joins Joseph of Arimathea in reverently burying the body of Jesus after the crucifixion, which suggests that he may have become a disciple.

Nicodemus, in this night-time conversation, recognises that Jesus is sent by God, and cites the signs performed by Jesus as evidence that God is with him. The first of the "signs" performed by Jesus is described in John chapter 2 and is the miracle of water turned into wine at the wedding in Cana. Maybe news of this event had reached Nicodemus, or he had witnessed or heard about other remarkable things that Jesus had done.

Jesus responds with a statement that no-one can see the kingdom of God without being born again, and this puzzles Nicodemus, who is thinking in earthly terms about natural birth. Jesus, however, is talking in spiritual picture-language as is customary in Jewish dialogue. His hearer was a teacher of Israel but one who had failed to understand something very important. Perhaps his great learning had actually become a barrier to his grasping this truth about the kingdom of God, that renewal through the Spirit is necessary. Sometimes before we can learn a truth, we have to unlearn other things that have led to misconceptions. Did Nicodemus perhaps think that the Jewish Torah (often translated "Law" but a better term would be "Instruction", referring to the first five books of the Bible) offered a path to the kingdom of God through a person following it?

There isn't time to cover this in detail here, but the apostle Paul says that salvation wasn't the purpose of the Torah. It was introduced to be a caretaker until salvation by faith in the Saviour is revealed, and to show people that they need saving because they cannot keep all of the law. See the letter to the Galatians for a deeper treatment of this.

Jesus states, in that most famous verse 16, that eternal life comes only through faith in him, the Son of God.

The introduction, prior to verse 16, of the image of the bronze serpent in the wilderness, is perhaps bizarre at first reading, but tells of an important truth. The story is told in the book of Numbers chapter 21, verses 4 to 9. The people, during their time in the wilderness, had rebelled against the Lord through their complaints, and the judgement for this was that God sent venomous serpents among them so that many died. Following the Lord's instructions, Moses made a serpent of bronze and erected it on a pole, so that anyone bitten by a snake could look at the serpent of bronze and recover. It may seem strange that a symbol of the cause of the problem should now be the means of healing, but note that the serpent of bronze represented sin that had been judged. In the same way, Jesus was lifted up from the earth on a cross and our sin was judged in his body as he died for us. Just as the people could look at the serpent on a pole and be healed, so people can look to Jesus and receive everlasting life because the judgement that we deserve has fallen upon him. This is a pictorial illustration of what it means to have faith in Christ: we look to him.

The point is that we cannot save ourselves. No one could keep God's laws perfectly so therefore all need a saviour. Being born is something that we do not do for ourselves, so being born again of the Spirit is also something that we cannot do for ourselves and we must look to the Lord to enable it for us.

Our other readings today show us a little of what it means to have faith. It's more than just an intellectual exercise. There are many who believe that God exists, but that does not always make them born again of the Spirit. There are many who believe that Jesus is real and even that he is God's Son, but they don't necessarily look to him for their salvation and thereby become born again of the Spirit. In Hebrew thought, faith is not just a noun but also a verb. It becomes real when put into practice. If I need to cross a river and there is a footbridge, and I believe intellectually that the footbridge is real and is strong enough to take my weight if I were to go across it, that would not in itself get me to the other side of the river. I have to physically travel across the bridge (rely on its strength and span) to get to the other side! Likewise, mere intellectual assent to Jesus' nature is not enough to grant a person everlasting life. It is necessary to take the action of making reliance on Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection, in other words to entrust ourselves to him. As Paul the apostle puts it in Romans 10:13, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved". The belief becomes saving faith by the action "calling". Again, in Romans 10:9-10 Paul joins belief in the heart that God raised Jesus from the dead with the action of confession on the lips that Jesus is Lord, and this brings salvation.

The passages about Abraham (originally called Abram) show that his faith was counted to him as righteousness. His faith in God's word was expressed in our reading from Genesis 12 when he followed God's command to leave his native land even when God had not yet revealed to him the country he was to travel to! Genesis chapter 15 describes how God promised Abraham that he would become a father and have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. It was when Abraham believed this that the Bible states that his faith was counted to him as righteousness. Therefore, the emphasis is on God's grace, and not on works of the law.

We cannot save ourselves. Our salvation, our being born again of the Spirit, our eternal life, is the gift of God by grace, through faith. Thanks be to God. Amen!

StF 565 – Only by grace can we enter

Only by grace can we enter,
Only by grace can we stand;
Not by our human endeavour,
But by the blood of the Lamb.
Into Your presence You call us, You call us to come.
Into Your presence You draw us,
And now by Your grace we come,
Now by Your grace we come.

Gerrit Gustafson © 1990 Integrity Music

Lord if You mark our transgressions,
Who would stand?
Thanks to Your grace we are cleansed
By the blood of the Lamb.
Lord if You mark our transgressions,
Who would stand?
Thanks to Your grace we are cleansed
By the blood of the Lamb.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord God, we thank you that you have provided the means of salvation through faith, apart from works, in order that we can be assured of life in your presence for ever. **Amen.**

We pray for the nations of the world, that they would turn to you and be saved. We pray for the messengers of the good news of the gospel of peace, that you protect them and grant that their message is heard all over the world. Protect Christians who are persecuted for their faith and help them to be strong.

We pray that in each nation there would be good governance in order that all may live in peace and prosperity. May wars come to an end and all people be valued.

Grant wisdom and righteousness to our own government, blessing for King Charles and Queen Camilla, and stability and prosperity to our nation.

We pray for the church in our land and worldwide to be united and a force for transformation of society. Guide us in our individual churches and as a circuit, that we may follow your ways.

Bless those in our congregations and others known to us who have need of healing, wisdom, strength or comfort. Help those in our society who feel alone. May they know fellowship with you and the love of others.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

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

The Lord's Prayer

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 trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

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. 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 for ever. **Amen.**

StF 556 – Just as I am

- 1) Just as I am, without one plea
But that you died and set me free,
And at your bidding, 'Come to me!'
O Lamb of God, I come!
- 2) Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings within and fear without,
O Lamb of God, I come!
- 3) Just as I am, you will receive,
Will welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
Because your promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come!
- 4) Just as I am - your love unknown
Has broken every barrier down -
Now to be yours, yes, yours alone,
O Lamb of God, I come!
- 5) Just as I am, of that free love
The breadth, length, depth, and height to prove,
Here for a season, then above,
O Lamb of God, I come!

Charlotte Elliott

Blessing

Let our hearts be filled with the joy of the knowledge of your amazing grace towards us and the generosity of your gift of salvation. **Amen.**

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and evermore. **Amen.**